

# Survey highlights major problems with library staffing

**Research shows that students perform better where there is collaboration between teachers and teacher librarians. Despite this, more and more schools in South Australia are inadequately staffed with qualified teacher librarians. SUE SPENCE of Adelaide High School reports on the findings of an AEU survey into school library staffing.**

---

In May this year, the AEU sent surveys to every DETE school, to assess how school libraries were being staffed. This survey was prompted by concerns that school libraries were not only understaffed, but were being staffed by unqualified personnel. The survey drew an excellent response – some 303 responses were received from a possible ? work sites. That response rate plus the follow-up queries about when the results would be published, are an indication of how widespread those staffing concerns are.

Unfortunately that survey has confirmed our worst fears. Of those 303 work sites, 107 had school libraries that were staffed below the formula, and 109 had staff without teacher librarian qualifications. Apart from those very small schools with no teacher librarian entitlement, a third of school libraries around the state are understaffed and/or staffed with unqualified personnel. A sectoral breakdown of the results is shown in the table below.

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Under TL formula %</b>	<b>On or over TL formula %</b>	<b>Qualified %</b>	<b>Not TL qualified %</b>
Junior Primary	12.5	87.5	50.0	50.0
JP/Primary	20.4	79.6	64.8	35.2
Primary	23.2	64.8	51.3	48.7
Secondary	89.6	8.3	63.8	36.2
Area	42.9	57.1	100.0	0.0
Special	14.3	57.1	100.0	0.0
R-12	37.5	62.5	71.4	28.6
Total	35.3	57.8	59.2	40.8

When the figures are examined sector by sector, the picture becomes even gloomier. An astounding 89.6% of secondary school libraries are understaffed by the formula! Furthermore only 63.8% of staff in positions in secondary schools are qualified as teacher librarians. The remaining positions are filled by teachers without librarianship qualifications, or by School Support Officers (SSOs). What happens to management of resources or programmes to develop information literacy in those schools?

The best staffed scenario is in Junior Primary school libraries, but even there 12.5% are under formula, and only half of the positions are staffed by qualified teacher librarians. R-12 school libraries have the best rate of staffing by qualified teacher librarians – but there are still some 28.6% that are run by unqualified personnel and over a third are understaffed.

Schools are quite clearly not meeting the recommended staffing formula for school libraries in far too many cases. If the SSO time shown in the survey results is converted into teacher

librarian time, the number of school libraries staffed on or over the teacher librarian entitlement according to enrolment, rises to 80.5%. If we can ignore the remaining 20% of school libraries that remain understaffed even on those figures, we still have less than 60% of all school libraries run by qualified teacher librarians. This indicates how much schools are exploiting both SSOs and those filling teacher librarian positions who keep the school library functional.

### **The case for teacher librarians**

But the school library needs to be far more than functional. The circulation of resources may be a function of any library, but school libraries have always had an educational purpose. That is why, for a while, South Australia led Australia, if not the world, in its provision of school library facilities and the allocation and appointment of qualified teacher librarians to provide the educational services required in a school. The facilities remain, although in what condition to meet the needs of a 21st century school is a question for another survey and article! The formula for teacher librarian time is still part of all school staffing documents. South Australia has slipped from the leading edge of developing information literate students because schools, school principals and Personnel Advisory Committees (PACs) have chosen to ignore and misuse that staffing formula for teacher librarians.

It may be that schools see replacing teacher librarians with SSOs as an easy cost-cutting exercise, since SSOs are so much cheaper than dual qualified teacher librarians. This blatant exploitation of SSOs is an issue in itself. But even worse is that apparent economic considerations over-ride educational theory and espoused departmental policy. *Foundations for the Future* declares, “Student learning is at the heart of everything we do”. Replacing teacher librarians with SSOs actively works against this, since it is hard to extrapolate improved learning outcomes from such a move.

*“I suspect these sorts of demands on teacher librarians are more widespread than any of us suspect, and that we are mostly too exhausted/busy to make more than small protesting noises about unsustainable workloads”*

One response to library survey

What such schools are missing or ignoring is the value-added asset that a teacher librarian can be in any school. A previous journal article (June 2002) “Oh where is a teacher librarian when you really need one?” described how a teacher librarian can contribute to the school community to a significant degree, particularly with ongoing curricular changes and ICT impacting on teacher workload. Teacher librarians ease that workload, not by re-shelving books but by using their expertise to collaborate with teachers; not by covering books but by providing valuable professional development in the use of ICT; not by checking books in and out but by joining committees to develop policies and practices that enhance student learning; not by chasing overdues but by working directly with students to develop their reading and information literacy skills. An SSO, despite all their hard work, cannot provide the service that someone qualified as both a teacher and a librarian can.

Many teacher librarians have been classroom teachers before they became qualified as both teacher and librarian. With the right support from school communities their extra skills can be of great benefit to both staff and students. If however schools choose to divert SSO time

elsewhere, the teacher librarian perforce becomes a highly paid SSO to keep the library functional. Where is the educational or economic sense in that?

Research supports the view that school libraries have an educational purpose and can have a positive impact on academic achievement, particularly at the primary and early secondary level. Where an impact on achievement and learning has been demonstrated, the key factors are collection levels, school library staffing levels, and collaboration between teacher librarian and teacher. School libraries have greatest impact when teachers and teacher librarians collaborate, particularly on collection development, in the planning of resources and instructional design, as well as provision by teacher librarians of training for teachers. Four different studies in the USA have found that students perform better academically where the LMS (Library Media Specialist, or teacher librarian to you and me):

- is part of a planning and teaching team with the classroom teacher,
- teaches information literacy, and
- provides one-to-one tutoring for students in need.

A detailed summary of the findings is available at

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed456861.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed456861.html) Plans are already underway to replicate the studies in Australia.

Such research supports the allocation of teacher librarian time found in DECS staffing documents. However the survey results clearly show that this allocation is not happening in reality - to the detriment of student learning, teacher workloads and efficient management of resources.

### **What can be done**

Apart from re-educating principals, teachers and school communities as to the value-added bonus of using qualified teacher librarians; as a professional group, teacher librarians are working with Universities to ensure an improved supply of qualified graduates. We need to break the self-fulfilling cycle that there are no jobs for graduates, therefore the universities cut their courses for teacher librarianship, therefore schools have to appoint unqualified teachers or SSOs. That cycle will only be broken when schools begin to use their allocation of teacher librarian time properly and fully, and appoint qualified staff; when PAC members remember this article as they write job and person descriptions for teacher librarian positions. A detailed role statement for teacher librarians is readily available from the SLASA website:

<http://slasa.asn.au>

The issue of teaching outside your area of expertise is not a new one, nor is it confined to teacher librarian positions. Teachers being placed in teacher librarian positions certainly have to confront it. In no way are they, or SSOs running school libraries, culpable for what has emerged from this survey. The department has seen fit to allocate time for teacher librarians as they do for student counsellors and ESL support etc. Why is there no responsibility to ensure that allocation is used fully and properly? How is the department working with universities to ensure a supply of qualified staff to fill those positions? It may be no coincidence that, while school libraries account for a sizeable chunk of most school budgets, and the department has invested heavily in library automation systems, there is no one in the department with overall responsibility for School Libraries. Every Learning Area and Essential Learning etc has their niche support in Head Office, but the old Libraries branch is long gone!

**This article was published in the AEU Journal, SA branch, 4 December 2002.**