

Reflections on School Libraries, Teacher-librarians and Literacy at Gold Coast Schools: Research Findings

By Dr Susan Boyce

Within this climate of economic and cultural review, teacher-librarians have been encouraged for some time now, to undertake and publish current, verified research as evidence of their capacity to enhance literacy outcomes in Australian schools. Given the difficulties associated with the production of credible evidence wrought through sophisticated methods and professional know-how, we are fortunate indeed to have been introduced to the **research report published in the last issue of *Synergy*** (volume 11, number 2, 2013), which, through the use of unique methods of analysis establishes and evaluates quantitative and qualitative evidence indicating positive links between school libraries, teacher-librarians and the achievement of literacy in the Gold Coast region. The paper gives a detailed, but abbreviated account of the first trial, or application of the research, an exploratory experience and test of methodology, confirming anticipated strengths as well as disclosing aspects in need of further attention. It is authored by Hilary Hughes (lead researcher) and the SLAQ Research Committee. This team also carried out the research, which is produced in partnership with the SLAQ and QUT and published in full, online at www.slaq.org.au.

Designed by and executed under the interested, but removed, auspices of the School Library Association of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, the Gold Coast research provides us with an example of a quality model that has much to offer. Its scope specifically addresses the needs of the profession in its present dilemma, and its range of application is efficiently broad, capable of a regional overview. Those familiar with the paper will recall that the study responds to claims by the House of Representatives Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools (2011), that under-resourcing of school libraries was due to lack of solid evidence related to Australian conditions. Unmoved by comprehensive submissions (SLAV, 2010; ALIA, 2010; ASLA, 2010) supplying established evidence from international and local sources confirming the veracity of library/teacher-librarian/literacy links with positive outcomes, the Inquiry's response requested further evidence detailing statistical breakdowns of teacher-librarian numbers in Australian schools and further substantiation of proof for claims that link school library programs with the development of students' literacy achievement.

The Gold Coast research takes up the Inquiry's challenge and addresses the required recommendations by targeting a selected sample of schools in the Gold Coast region. Significantly, the research is designed to focus on

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the perceptions of school Principals instead of teacher-librarians, an astute decision ensuring a less partisan source of data whilst simultaneously raising awareness where it counts most - at the peak level of school decision-making and funding. At first, this strategy seemed a master stroke to me, but as I came to understand the over-all response from the Principals, which resulted in such a disappointingly small sample, I began to wonder if confronting Principals with literacy issues might be fraught with some unfathomable, invisible problem. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised. Literacy is, and always has been, a vexed issue. It is regularly the subject of political and cultural contention, and never more so for Australian schools as recently, under the jurisdiction of NAPLAN testing. Perhaps it is possible that the permanent cloud of acrimony and anxiety continually looming over literacy issues may have indirectly inhibited the operability of the study.

The researchers acknowledge the smallness of the sample as one of the limitations of the study because it means that the research Findings cannot be generalised beyond the twenty-seven Gold Coast schools whose Principals consented to participate in the study, a proportionately small percentage of the ninety-seven schools in the region. It means that a breath-taking total of seventy Gold Coast Principals declined the invitation to participate in a study concerning literacy and teacher-librarians! Could it be that their collective mindset was infected by a desire to avoid controversy? Or were they completely unconcerned about literacy, or simply too busy? Their absence strikes me as conspicuously palpable. Obviously these Principals were not

persuaded by the anticipated benefits, or the promise of confidentiality and privacy referred to in the Participation Information Sheet (Appendix E). Inexperienced as I am with large scale population research, my response is probably somewhat naïve. Nevertheless, I can't help thinking that such wholesale self-exclusion from participation surely holds implications for future iterations of the research model. Does it throw doubt on the strategy to approach Principals only? Or, does it suggest that the project needed better marketing? The research Recommendations suggest sending the questionnaire to a larger population to repeat the analysis with a bigger sample. Hopefully this will solve the small sample problem. The researchers do not report follow-up inquiries as to the Principals' reasons, but some clarification would be instructive, if only to deflate speculation . . . such as my own.

Fortunately, although the sample of consenting schools is proportionately small, it includes an adequate range of schools with sufficient variety of type, and scope to provide a worthy source of information. Principals at these schools responded to surveys and interviews which yielded 'a rich mix of quantitative and qualitative data' specifically describing school demographics, degrees of library service, including programs designed to make a difference to students' literacy outcomes, as well as details related to levels and quality of library staffing, EFT library staff/student ratios and NAPLAN scores for Reading and Writing.

The Research Findings, which confirm positive relationships between teacher-librarian work and students' literacy outcomes, are graphically illustrated by statistical correlations of quantitative data as shown in Appendix A, Figures 2-5 in the *Synergy paper* (and pp.36-39 of the online report). These figures plot school/student based statistics against NAPLAN Writing and Reading scores, a very neat juxtaposing of the interests of the government Inquiry and researchers' investigation. On the matter of quantitative data, however, it should be noted that the researchers acknowledge one further limitation to the study, namely that it is possible for other elements, not included in the scope of their investigation, to have influenced the literacy relationships reported in these Findings. This is true, but within the multiple spheres of students' literacy experience and practice it is extremely difficult to isolate, or quantify the impact of teacher-librarians' influences separately from those of extraneous elements. I think that, given the purpose and intention of the study, the selected sources of data provide a legitimate focus and are pragmatically appropriate. Analysis of qualitative data fleshes out shortcomings reported in levels staffing, thereby bringing much needed attention to the workforce gap of teacher-librarians across Australia. Even in this small sample, it also reveals inequities and difference: between the haves and have-nots in matters of resources and staffing; between government and non-government schools; between operational optimism and despondent disappointment; between the reductive NAPLAN perception of literacy as 'Reading' and 'Writing' and the teacher-librarians' more expansive professional understanding of literacy as a holistic practice.

The research model succeeds on a number of fronts: it provides a very telling snapshot of the Australian school libraries in this small group; the Findings are relevant to the recommendations suggested by the House of Representatives Inquiry, and are surely sufficiently 'solid to suit them'; and the Research aims and questions are satisfactorily fulfilled. The study can certainly claim to offer a representative impression of the impact of school libraries and teacher-librarians on literacy achievement as it occurs in the sample of Gold Coast schools, if not an absolute, universal reflection of the wider region. I think the research model has promising potential to serve the needs of school libraries and teacher-librarians, especially given the opportunity to work with a proportionately larger sample. On these grounds, Congratulations are due to Hilary Hughes and her research team, along with SLAQ and QUT also. I wish them every success with the future sample hunting.

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References

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