

Response to Collaborators or Competitors

By Dr Susan Boyce

If you want to be incrementally better: Be competitive.

If you want to be exponentially better: Be cooperative

Unknown source.

Reynolds' and Carroll's research paper 'Collaborators or Competitors', published in the last edition of *Synergy* (vol. 10:1), describes the quandary experienced by teacher-librarians in Melbourne's Western Metropolitan Region following the Region's directive for schools to establish classroom libraries for the purpose of improving students' literacy levels. Having surveyed the processes undertaken to incorporate this project, and noting the low level of school library involvement in this project, Reynolds and Carroll ask why it is that teacher-librarians and school libraries in the Region are not more involved, considering that they should be well placed to do so, supported as they are, by professional associations and the strength of evidential, education research in their favour.

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In fact, of those schools included in the research study, data reveal that 95% have school libraries, of which 76% register some involvement with the classroom library project, but disappointingly, largely within the limits of

routine technical or clerical tasks. Only a minimal number of teacher-librarians found opportunity to engage with their teacher colleagues in the project as professional literacy educators. In view of these findings, Reynolds and Carroll speculate as to whether the onus for non-involvement lies with the teacher-librarians or with circumstances under which the classroom library project was instigated. It appears that the Region's directives regarding responsibility for the project are somewhat ambiguous. Whilst guidelines for the project specifically nominate teachers and school administrators, they also allow the possibility perhaps for further school-based decisions. So who decides whether to invite teacher-librarians in or leave them out? As it happens, it appears that most school administrators decided to stick with the unspoken assumption that, as teacher-librarians are not clearly nominated in the directive document, their participation is not presumed, beyond the convenience of fulfilling mundane tasks. I imagine that this invisible embargo must have left the WMR teacher-librarians feeling perplexed and politically excluded.

The study is backgrounded by NAPLAN, the on-going regime of testing for literacy and numeracy throughout Years Three to Nine in Australian schools. The public ranking of these test results, which inevitably reveals unfavourable comparisons between schools and regions, directly implicates classroom teachers and school administrators, a situation that has motivated many schools to urgently seek ways and means of improving their results. Reports of other remedial projects in regions with a comparable demographic to that of the WMR show clearly, that to succeed, such efforts usually involve tight leadership and the selective recruitment of hand-picked teams, whose dedication and rigorous application as 'believers' guarantee the impetus of the project. Not surprisingly, membership in the 'team' has its own rewards - the somewhat exclusive aura of belonging and striving, in return for conscientious compliance and strict fulfillment of the project's systems - and the kudos of success, should rankings improve. Whilst this 'tribal' scenario does not particularly show in data collected by Reynolds and Carroll, it is possible that similar conditions of ownership and ideological allegiance might have accompanied the WMR's promotion and establishment of the classroom library project and thereby added to the general distancing of school library services, perhaps even to the extent of alienating teacher-librarians.

Regardless of whether or not these factors are operative, it is disheartening, as Reynolds and Carroll note, that the Region's directives for their project fail, in the first place, to acknowledge the value of school library resources already available in most of their schools; and even more discouraging, should it be the case, that, in overlooking the resources of school libraries, regional advisors may not have been aware of research tabled in the 2010 *Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools*, which validates the potential contribution of teacher-librarians to students' literacy learning. Harking back to the public ranking of test results, all of this suggests a climate of urgent pressure in which the delegation of indictment and reparation takes the shortest route possible, to the classroom, without consideration of other available sources of support within a whole school community. It might also account for the disturbing, flow-on effect of pervasive disjunction between the Region, classroom teachers and the specialist services of teacher-librarianship.

Apart from Reynolds and Carroll, who speaks up for the school libraries and teacher-librarians in the WMR if they don't speak up for themselves? It seems that senior members of the school communities involved in this study did not advocate on their behalf, or even consider the mutual benefits to be gained by more relevant collaboration between teachers and teacher-librarians in their classrooms. This discounting of library services seems especially paradoxical in the case of the WMR where public libraries flourish, valued by their communities, but where government school libraries are undervalued, underfunded and understaffed. It is difficult to imagine this situation arising in the Region's independent schools, where administrators are keenly aware of the value of their libraries and fund them accordingly.

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In the introduction to their paper, Reynolds and Carroll recall past years when classroom libraries consisted of a random collection of recreational and instructional books, stored in cupboards, and only rarely accessed by children at times outside of the teaching program. Of course classroom libraries of today bear no resemblance to these, but it is still unlikely that they could ever rival the breadth and richness of a school library collection. In the light of the perceived sectoral disjunctions suggested above, it is worth recalling the active contribution of classroom teachers during the 1960's and 70's, who fought stridently to establish the Australian school library movement. Whilst this achievement is more generally associated with eminent personalities and the joint efforts of government and Library Association reports, these luminaries were strongly supported by classroom teachers, many of whom confirmed their dedication by re-training as teacher-librarians in order to ensure that their own students benefited from the largesse of this resource. Now, in this case study, it is disappointing to see how the consequences of externally imposed, systematized management not only devalues, but also erodes the legacy of collegiality between literacy professionals within the WMR's school communities.

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Many school communities have felt the blunt threat of NAPLAN. Competitive pressure associated with the publication of results, winners and losers, has generated a variety of quirky outcomes ranging from ideological zealotry to strategic evasion. Relevant to the future of school libraries within these circumstances, Reynolds'

and Carroll's paper serves to illustrate collateral damage that sometimes accompanies well-intentioned solutions when policy is formulated and interpreted within a narrow focus, and without regard for the wider, equally relevant operative contexts of each workplace. If they value their libraries, school administrators, as well teacher-librarians would do well to pay attention to the outcomes of this case study. Equally important is the need for teacher-librarians to make their presence felt, to be positively assertive about the benefits they can offer, and if necessary, seek support from their professional associations. I hope the WMR will take note of Reynolds' and Carroll's research and heed its proposition for collaborative cross-fertilisation of professional knowledge and management skills between teachers and teacher-librarians, which would surely augment the resource base and literacy outcome of the WMR's classroom libraries.

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