

On the Inquiry

By Dr Ross Todd

School libraries in Australia are on the threshold of important developments, as evidenced by the Parliamentary inquiry underway. The implementation of the potential recommendations from this committee will have a far-reaching impact on learning, active participation in society and on the Australian economy in this (no longer information) but knowledge age. It is deeply encouraging to read the depth, richness and diversity of the submissions, and particularly the strong commitment to student engagement in learning, and the transformative role of school libraries in shaping the development of students as knowledge creators, knowledge producers, and knowledge users in a global and increasingly digital world.

The beginning is already there – recent infrastructure investments are very welcome, particularly in the primary school library sector. However, the objectives of the Digital Education Revolution and Australian Curriculum will only come to fruition if we also invest in appropriately staffed and resourced school libraries – school libraries with teacher-librarians who can bring the 21st century learning environment to life, and give students the literacy and cross-curricula skills and capabilities that underpin all learning. It is teacher-librarians, in collaboration with their teaching colleagues, who can unlock the potential of this curriculum innovation and interactive, web 2.0 technologies.

All Australian citizens are entitled to develop the skills that allow them to enjoy participative and responsible citizenship. These skills can be defined as reading literacy, information literacy and digital literacy.

We know from international research that appropriately staffed and resourced school libraries can overcome socio-economic barriers. This research confirms the positive correlation between the role of the teacher-librarian and higher literacy and academic achievement scores. It indicates that a strong library program which integrates ICT and literacy skills leads to higher student achievement, regardless of the socio-economic or educational levels of the adults in the community.

This is what parents want for their children – they want to see a school where their child's potential in this digital age is encouraged and supported, and where their learning environment is enriched by engaging print and digital resources. Parents also want their children to enjoy what they had – the opportunity to let their imagination run free, and be introduced to story, ideas and the wisdom of those who have gone before. This is what the skills and knowledge of the teacher-librarian provides.

We haven't got enough of these people! A very positive recommendation from this committee would be to provide the encouragement and means for all schools, through their school libraries, to provide what parents want and what students and teachers need.

The vitality, cultural heart and well-being of a local community is sustained by community interaction with a quality school library – cultural events, ICT skills development, parent/community partnerships. All of these are driven by the rich, well-resourced space that a school library provides.

Many of us are asked by journalists and media commentators: do school libraries really have a role now that we have computers? Well, of course, all of us know that our students need even greater guidance, stronger skills and the ability to create and share their new knowledge. We have a community responsibility to our students to ensure that they are able to navigate this digital world – safely, in an informed way and with the skills to use and evaluate what they find for continuous lifelong learning.

It is important to understand that this is a complex challenge, and translating this into meaningful instruction offers exciting opportunities. A focus on the development of deep knowledge means explicit attention to moving far beyond capabilities centering on resources – finding, accessing and evaluating sources – to a central focus on the critical engagement with diverse, conflicting ideas, developing critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities, and developing the intellectual scaffolds for building personal knowledge. A

focus on the digital context also means that this rich knowledge development must take place in the context of team work and partnerships – participatory, shared and connected learning – and engaging the multitude of digital tools that foster intellectual engagement, creativity, innovation, and the representation and presentation of knowledge.

Dr Ross J Todd is Associate Professor in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and Director of the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL).