

# School Libraries in Australia '88

by Anne Hazell

The school library network is the largest component of the Australian library network, encompassing more than 10,000 schools and influencing in some way almost all of Australia's three million school children. Over the last 35 years there is no doubt that great advances have been made with the concept of a school library changing from 'a place where books are kept' to a dynamic, integrated resource service, offering library and information services to all members of the school community.

## Historical background

Many of these changes had their origins in two events in the 1960s, both of which involved the LAA. One was the visit in 1964 to Australia of Professor Sara Fenwick from the School of Librarianship at the University of Chicago and the other was the first Federal grant to school libraries in 1969.

Fenwick came at the invitation of the LAA as a Fulbright lecturer to work with Australian librarians serving children in school and public libraries. Her report, *School and children's libraries in Australia*, published in 1966, revealed just how poor school library services were with respect to their collections, funding and staffing, and, importantly, their impact on the instructional program of the school. The work done by Fenwick provided much ammunition for the lobbying campaign, led by the LAA, which culminated in 1969 in the provision of \$27m of Federal funds over the next three years for secondary school libraries.

This amount was increased to \$30m in 1972 for the next triennium and later grants extended to cover primary school libraries. Members of the LAA who were involved in this campaign look back with satisfaction to this success. Even 20 years later, many believe that it is the Association's greatest achievement in the field of lobbying at the national level.

In the halcyon days of the 70s, growth was the keyword in relation to school libraries: growth in the number of library buildings, the size of the collections, and the number of trained teacher-librarians and central support staff. A significant proportion of these early grants funded short courses to train qualified teachers to work as teacher-librarians. In 1977, the Commonwealth Schools Commission published *Books and beyond*, a set of

quantitative and qualitative guidelines for the development of school libraries. This publication, and the revised edition which appeared in 1979, have been used as the measuring stick for library development by both government and non-government schools since that time.

If the 60s were the years of expectation and the 70s the years of expansion, the 80s have been at best, the years of consolidation, and at worst, of regression. In the best examples, school library resource services have consolidated their role in the curriculum program and are indeed having an impact upon the instructional program of the school. In the worst, schools still see their library program and their teacher-librarian, if there is one, as irrelevant to children's learning. Nonetheless, because of the rapid growth which occurred in the 70s, Australian school libraries, even now, compare most favourably with their North American counterparts and more than favourably with those in the United Kingdom where the teaching role of the teacher-librarian has yet to be clarified.

## Current trends

The issue of equity or social justice has been constantly before the eyes of educators in the 80s. Recognising the needs of special groups within the school community and providing for those needs, while realising that resource budgets are shrinking and that the Australian dollar buys less overseas than it used to, has resulted in many schools involving themselves in a juggling act of immense proportions.

Teacher-librarians are conscious that resource services must take into account and value the different ways students learn, their gender, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginality and disabilities. These considerations affect the resource services' program, the physical environment, collection, organisational systems and staffing. Equality of access to resources and information is the right of all students whether they are in a small, remote school in the north-west of Western Australia or a large metropolitan Sydney secondary school. How to ensure this equality has affected many of the decisions made about school library resource services in the last decade and will continue to do so in the next.

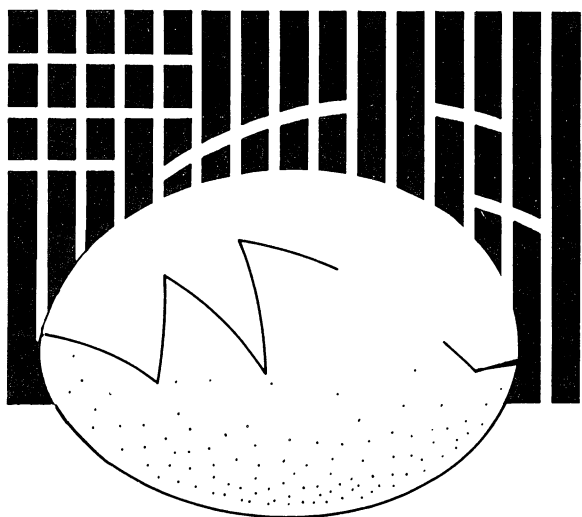
It has taken almost 20 years for Fenwick's

comments about the possible impact of the library upon the school's educational program to take root and begin to grow. During the 70s, some far-sighted educators kept at the back of their minds that, when all the catalogues were established, the vertical files organised and the film projectors bought, the time would be right for the resource centre and the teacher-librarian to begin to exert an influence in the development of the school's curriculum. Until that time, the role of the teacher-librarian as a teacher rather than as an organiser of resources would not be clear to the school community. Ironically this teaching role was not clear to many teacher-librarians either.

In the mid-80s, the buzz words in school librarianship are resource-based learning, co-operative program planning and teaching, and information skills. Again, it took an external influence to be the catalyst which clarified the link between resources and children's learning for many teacher-librarians and, importantly, education administrators. Canadian educators, Ken and Carol-Ann Haycock, are well known in this country through their writings in which they emphasise the necessity for teacher and teacher-librarian to work co-operatively in curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation. Their visit in 1986, which included five three-day seminars in four states on the topic of co-operative program planning and teaching, will doubtless seem as important to those researching history of Australian school librarianship in 20 years time as the Fenwick visit in 1964 is now seen to be.

In the current context of school librarianship, resource-based learning is 'the methodology that assumes students will learn from their own direct confrontation, individually or in a group, with a learning resource or set of resources and activities connected with them, rather than by conventional exposition by the teacher' (Beswick, N. *Resource-based learning*, Heinemann, 1977). Co-operative program planning and teaching is the term used to describe the approach to learning and teaching in which the teacher and teacher-librarian work together in developing resource-based units of work. Information skills encompasses study skills, library skills, computer skills, research skills, life/living skills and inquiry skills, (*Teachers, information and school libraries*, IFLA, 1985), all of which are required for people to function

Cont'd page 6



keep this egg  
warm  
it's about to hatch.

Cont'd from page 6

effectively in the information society. An essential component of co-operative planning and teaching is the requirement that the teacher-librarian has dual qualifications in education and librarianship.

Policy statements and guidelines which promote the role of the teacher-librarian in this kind of learning process are being developed by school library services in most systems. With such titles as *Teaching information skills* (Vic), *Partners in learning* (SA), *Teaching students how to learn* (Tas) and *Information skills guidelines* (NSW), the focus is obvious. LAA publications, *Supporting the curriculum: policies, perspectives and programs* and *Priority 1: information skills*, (plus the involvement of the School Libraries Section at the state and national levels in conferences about the changed role of the teacher-librarian) are designed to support the various education department policies.

The Australian School Library Association is similarly involved and has recently launched a new national journal of school librarianship, *ACCESS*, which has as its stated objective to provide 'an open forum for teacher-librarians, librarians and teachers concerned

with effective resource-based learning. It focuses on issues related to co-operative curriculum development and implementation and resource management and usage.'

Producing information literate students is, then, the challenge facing teacher-librarians. This is the role of teacher-librarians and school library resource services in the development and implementation of a national information plan. If schools fail to produce graduates who are aware of the power of information, library services of all kinds will be less effective.

To this end school libraries, like other kinds of libraries, have become involved in automation, networks and other resource-sharing activities. Automated library management systems are beginning to appear in some schools, particularly secondary schools, ranging in sophistication from home-grown overdue systems to DYNIX, the all-encompassing library management system recently recommended for purchase in South Australia.

ASCIS (Australian Schools Catalogue Information Service) which began in 1984 has had a great impact upon the work of most teacher-librarians and ancillary staff, offering as it

does cataloguing data for 250,000 items (December 1987) in microfiche and card formats and online. From its beginnings as a provider of cataloguing data only, the ASCIS database is now growing rapidly as the carrier of information produced by a number of projects, mainly under the auspices of the Curriculum Development Centre.

These include ACIN (Australian Curriculum Information Network) and its state versions which provide abstracts containing descriptions of good curriculum practice, reviews from the National Software Co-ordination Unit and a bibliography of aboriginal studies resources. ASCIS now offers electronic mail and reviewing services to its online users. The extent of the influence which ASCIS has had upon education in Australia is revealed in a recent statement by the Director of the Curriculum Development Centre that 'there should not be a school or other educational institution in the country that is not a subscriber to the ASCIS service'.

Online access to other databases and services such as Viatel, PressCom (the Adelaide Advertiser) and AAP are proving to be useful in schools, although again, at the moment they are more likely to be seen in secondary schools. Publications such as *Online information services for schools* from the School Libraries Section in WA are helpful to schools going in this direction.

Many surveys, including SAIL, (Survey of Australian Interlibrary Lending), have shown that school libraries do not participate extensively in the national interlibrary loan network, partly at least, because of the existence of well-established local, informal networks. These hub or cluster groups are people networks as much as resource networks, focusing on bringing together for personal and professional development purposes teacher-librarians who would otherwise suffer from professional isolation in the day-to-day situation. The resource-sharing networks which arise in these circumstances frequently meet the needs of the schools represented in the groups far more successfully than does the formal interlibrary loan network.

One outstandingly successful resource-sharing activity has occurred in South Australia with the school community library program which began in 1977. There are now 44 joint school and public library facilities in rural areas, many in places which would otherwise have no public library service at all. While some similar developments have met with failure or limited success in other parts of Australia and overseas, there is no doubt that rural South Australia has benefited greatly from this resource-sharing venture between the Education Department, the Department of Local Government, the Libraries Board and local government authorities.

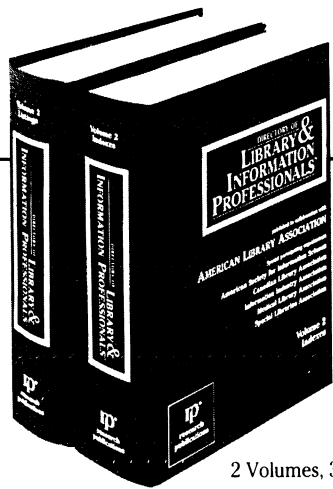
## Concerns

Many of the current concerns of teacher-librarians, such as the effect of cuts upon resource budgets, are the same as those in other parts of the profession but others are specific to the school library area. In March 1964 Barbara Buick said in *ALJ* that 'The need for professional identity is perhaps the most pressing question facing school librarians today'. She was referring to the lack of understanding of the role of the teacher-librarian within the educational structure of the school, a problem which still exists for some teacher-librarians and one which was identified again in 1985 by Jim Dwyer in a paper which he presented to AACOBs, entitled *Crisis in school libraries*.

Cont'd page 7

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**School Libraries in Australia 88**  
cont'd from page 6

However in the mid-80s, this lack of understanding of the special role of the teacher-librarian also exists within the profession of librarianship itself, where big tends to be beautiful, and success is often measured by the size of the library's budget, the number of loans per annum and how many items are listed in the catalogue. In a paper presented to the Schools Section AGM in 1987, LAA national president, Alan Bundy, pointed out to the members in each state just how widespread this lack of understanding is and urged the Section to undertake a publicity program to make the role of teacher-librarians clear to other librarians. The program has been so successful that it has attracted overseas visitors from New Zealand and Canada including Assoc. Professor Larry Amey from Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, whose recently published book describes in detail this resource-sharing activity.

Another concern of teacher-librarians is the lack of teaching about the methodology of resource-based learning in teacher pre-service education programs. While literature-based reading is accepted by many educators as a most effective way of teaching children to read, even in this area little attention is paid in most teacher education courses to the extensive range of material with which the teacher must be familiar if such programs are to be successful. In other subject areas, even less attention is paid to learning how resources can be used effectively in children's learning.

In relation to financial matters, the axing of Commonwealth grants to school libraries in 1986 has exacerbated the difficulties already faced by many schools as a result of rising costs of purchasing material, especially from overseas. To conserve their diminished staffing budgets, most education departments have made severe cuts in advisory staff, including advisory teacher-librarians. It is still the case that some schools do not have teacher-librarians at all, particularly small schools, and that some people employed as teacher-librarians are not qualified, in some cases as teachers and in others as librarians. Present restrictions on intakes into tertiary courses are making this situation worse in

some states since teachers who are willing to undertake teacher-librarianship study are being excluded from the schools of librarianship.

The statements above concerning the effect of budget cuts are certainly true in the broad sense. However it is impossible to quantify these effects since statistics relating to school library services on a national basis are not available. Certainly the collation of statistics is time consuming for both the compilers and the schools themselves.

However, it seems unlikely that arguments concerning the effects of funding cuts are going to carry much weight with educational administrators or politicians at either the state or national level, if they cannot be supported with statistical evidence.

However in the mid 80s, this lack of understanding of the special role of the teacher librarian also exists within the profession of librarianship itself, where big tends to be beautiful, and success is often measured by the size of the library's budget, the number of loans per annum and how many items are listed in the catalogue.

**Future directions**

In 1987, at the urging of the LAA, the Commonwealth Schools Commission granted \$52,000 for a research project to investigate the information needs of schools. The results of this investigation should be known by the end of 1988 and could prove as important as the results of the Fenwick report. In part, the report may include an update of *Books and beyond* but, undoubtedly, the picture of school libraries in Australia will be much clearer than it is at the moment.

Technological developments such as CD-ROM will affect the way in which libraries of all kinds provide information, with some schools already benefiting from ERIC being available in this format. Investigations by ASCIS may see the establishment of a national

reviewing service in print format, something which is sadly lacking at the moment. Certainly, other projects will add the information which they produce to the ASCIS database and states will make more use of ASCIS as a carrier of their own information about courses, perhaps extending eventually to a database of tertiary courses to assist students in their career planning.

Many of the concerns and issues described above are outside the immediate sphere of influence of the LAA. But one is not. Teacher-librarians in Australia at the moment are represented by two, and in some states three, professional associations. To become an effective lobbying group fulfilling our role as the advocates of school library resource services both in the national library network and in the learning of the children we teach, it is essential that we speak as one voice. With the full understanding and support of all members of the profession of librarianship, the LAA and ASLA must be united in presenting a single point of view about the future of school libraries in this country for the benefit of the whole profession. Remember — tomorrow's decision makers have their attitudes to libraries determined by today's school and public libraries.



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