

The most essential connection?

Librarianship, like other professions in the 21st century, is a broad church, the values and longer-term societal responsibilities of which can be easily overlooked by its preoccupied specialist sectors.

This breadth, and the importance of greater connection between those sectors, have been reinforced for me during the second half of this year through my participation in every ALIA sectional conference, as well as others.

Among the other conferences was that of the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) with which ALIA now has a formal agreement to establish a joint issues taskforce. Held in October, *Forging future directions* was professionally stimulating and enjoyable. It was attended by some 300 teacher librarians. However the fact that there is much work to do before all Australian school children and teachers have access to good libraries and qualified teacher librarians was emphasised by the government/independent school split of the participants. About seventy per cent were from independent schools, at a time when seventy per cent of Australian children depend on government schooling for their education. Whether this conference participant ratio is a consequence of the constraints on a teacher librarian employment in government schools — Tasmania alone is 207 positions short of the national standard — or lack of school funds for staff development, or the trend to self-managing government schools, one can only speculate. However it does suggest that many independent school children and teachers have better access to teacher librarians and well resourced analog and digital libraries than their counterparts in state and territory government schools — a profound educational and equity issue requiring focused attention by ALIA and ASLA, and, dare one suggest it, our national Minister for Education.

In Canada, the national librarian — a scholar — has recently attracted great media attention by his critique of the variable and often poor support of many school libraries in his country. The situation is possibly not as extreme in Australia, but there are major issues about the need for more qualified teacher librarians in secondary schools, and particularly in primary schools. For example, only three per cent of Victorian primary schools have one. All of which refutes an assertion of a delegate at the 1898 — yes 1898 — Library Association of Australasia conference that 'The utility and importance of school libraries calls for no special pleading from anyone I think'. There is also a real issue about education for teacher librarianship in Australian universities, although it is good to see institutions like the University of Canberra recently taking initiatives in this area.

Notwithstanding these issues, Australian teacher librarianship is a dynamic contributor

to the profession, with practitioners of international repute. This was manifest in the papers and workshops at the ASLA conference, with their high focus on reading and literacy, information literacy, knowledge management and online developments. Other sectors in our profession have now followed the information literacy lead set by teacher librarians in the late 1980s, although as their initiator I was intrigued by a session describing the successful application in a NSW primary school of the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) *Information literacy standards* [<http://www.caul.edu.au>]. These standards, as I discovered at the ALIA Special, Health and Law Libraries conference, are also being used in special libraries. Information literacy is indeed becoming a key connector across the profession.

My formal contribution to the ASLA conference was a paper *Essential connections: school and public libraries for lifelong learning* [<http://www.library.unisa.edu.au/papers/essential.htm>]. I argued that teacher and public librarians cannot achieve their full contribution to learning and society in isolation from each other. It also emphasised that the individual and co-operative performance of school and public libraries during the formative childhood years of decision makers is critical to future investment in all Australian libraries. In other words, that the condition and performance of school and public libraries should be a greater knowledge-quest and concern of other parts of the profession than is generally the case.

The extent of the knowledge gaps is suggested from the results of a first national survey of school and public library interaction described in my paper. On the positive side, the survey showed that school-public library interaction has increased over the last five years. At the local level many worthwhile initiatives are reported. At the state level there are also several well-appreciated broader initiatives to support schools, particularly from the State Library of New South Wales, the State Library of Victoria, the University of Queensland and the University of South Australia.

Less positively, sixty-three per cent of teacher librarians consider their knowledge of public library issues and developments to be very low or low, and seventy-one per cent of public librarians consider their knowledge of school library issues and developments to be very low or low. Those are big knowledge gaps from two areas of the profession, the connections between which are so important. Similar gaps of awareness and knowledge exist between other of our professional silos. This is at a time when the best possible understanding and mutual support for the respective contributions we can all make to the information enabling of Australia are needed. Agree, disagree? Have any suggestions for the ALIA-ASLA policy group? Let *inCite* know [incite@alia.org.au]. ■



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