The school library workforce in Australia

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Abstract

A literature review by Lonsdale in 2003 observed that 'a lack of systematically aggregated national data makes it difficult to gain an accurate picture of national trends in Australia in relation to the staffing of school libraries' and noted 'an apparent decline in the numbers of qualified teacher librarians employed in school libraries in public schools in Australia.' This absence of data was also acknowledged in the 2011 report from the Inquiry of the House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee, which recommended a thorough workforce gap analysis of teacher librarians across Australian schools. New analysis of the Staff in Australia's Schools surveys from 2007, 2010 and 2013, points to a decline in primary school teachers in library settings, fewer teachers working in libraries in low SES schools compared to high SES schools; and over one-third of primary teachers and one-quarter of secondary teachers working in school libraries having no tertiary education in the area. Further data are provided and the findings are discussed.

Australian Council for Educational Research

Introduction

The library profession needs data. Without data there is limited basis from which to plan, to measure improvement, declare success or to explain the impact of one's work. Librarianship is not alone as a profession in need of data, but as a profession with information in its DNA there is no excuse for a lack of information.

An oft-quoted statement in Australian school librarianship circles is Lonsdale's (2003) statement, "a lack of systematically aggregated national data makes it difficult to gain an accurate picture of national trends in Australia in relation to the staffing of school libraries" (p. 32). This conference paper tells the story of work in the quest for school library workforce data in the years since Lonsdale's review.

Literature review

School libraries straddle two sectors: librarianship and education. As a result, there is a need to look to both sectors to conduct a review of the data sources available about school libraries. A number of government and industry sources of workforce data relevant to this topic are reviewed below.

Library sector data

According to the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2014), there were 7,343 persons who reported that their main job was in the libraries and archives industry. The most common occupations were Librarian, Library Assistant, and Library Technician. Unfortunately, census data are not able to distinguish teacher librarians. Teachers working in a school library could have indicated that they were working in the library sector or in the education sector. Library assistants working in schools are possibly also missing from the ABS figures.

The *ALIA LIS Education, Skills and Employment Trend Report 2014* provides an in-depth view of ABS data on the library labour force, as well as library sector-specific data from the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), the Department of Education's Higher Education Statistics, the Department of Employment's Job Outlook, National and State Libraries of Australasia annual statistics about public libraries and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) data on students in vocational education library courses. In the 34 pages of this document there are no figures relating to school library staff, except to note that there were then three universities offering specific courses for teacher librarians (p.14). The report did not detail the number of students studying at, or graduating from, these teacher librarianship courses.

Education sector data

Data from the education sector comes in many forms, covering different purposes. High level national teacher workforce data is published by the ABS in Schools, Australia, 2015 and collated as part of the *National Report on Schooling* (ACARA, 2012). Most of this data comes from the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC)

census undertaken by all schools in August. This report has no mention of school libraries or their staffing, but the appendix does include domestic enrolments in tertiary teacher education courses, stating that in 2012 there were 46 students enrolled in post-graduate teacher librarianship courses in Australia and 35 graduates. These figures do not appear to be an accurate representation of tertiary teacher librarianship enrolments when the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU) reported they had a total of 343 teacher librarianship students in 2009, and 64 completions (CSU, 2010). Queensland University of Technology (QUT) reported 110 students total in 2010 (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 2010, p.43).

When a teacher applies for teacher registration or for a teaching job, they will be asked to supply evidence of qualifications in any relevant specialist area. If employers maintain this data they do not make it readily available, and state-based teacher registration bodies do not distinguish between specialisations of registered teachers in the statistical returns contained in their annual reports.

School library sector data

The Australian School Libraries Research Project (ALIA, ASLA & Edith Cowan University, 2007) was a major data gathering exercise from school libraries across Australia. Just over 600 school library personnel responded to an online survey (Combes, 2008, p.3). This online self-selection survey found that 18.8% of Australian schools had no professional staff (p. 17).

In 2010, the then Minister for Education, the Hon. Julia Gillard MP, asked the Education and Training Committee of the 42nd Parliament to inquire into and report on school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools (House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee, 2011). One of the dominant themes that emerged from this Inquiry was "a lack of hard data, especially collated at the national level relating to staffing issues, specifically determining the actual numbers of teacher librarians in Australian schools, their qualifications, and part-time/full-time status" (p. 84).

The only national data then available was about primary school teachers working in the library. In their submission to the Inquiry, the then Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2010) used data from the 2006–07 *Staff in Australia's Schools* (SiAS) survey of teachers and school leaders (p. 11). This survey collected information on those who were teaching as primary specialist teachers in library and those at the primary level who had completed tertiary study in that area. Data from secondary teachers was not collected. From this survey DEEWR extrapolated that at that time there were an estimated 6,300 primary specialist library teachers teaching in the library, 7,300 primary teachers who had undertaken at least one year of tertiary study for library specialist teaching and 4,800 primary teachers who had undertaken teaching methodology for library specialist teaching. They also noted that 5% of primary principals identified that they had at least one primary library teacher position unfilled towards the end of 2006, and an estimated 400 primary library teacher vacancies nationally.

The Australian Government reported then that it was intending to undertake a second SiAS survey in 2010 and that consideration was being given to collecting data on teacher librarians in both primary and secondary school settings. This was a major step forward for data collection related to school libraries effectively doubling the data available. If this was a direct outcome of the 2010 Inquiry then it was certainly a positive.

In its *Future of the Library and Information Science Profession* series, ALIA (2014) used the data from the 2010 SiAS report (McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon & Murphy, 2011) to suggest that there were some 5,600 library teachers in primary schools and 2,900 in secondary schools, making a total of 8,500 teachers in a library setting.

While education unions and school library professional associations undertake sporadic surveys in response to local issues, the only regular surveying of school libraries in Australia occurs in the commercial sector with the Softlink Survey run annually since 2010. This self-selection sampling survey received 1,380 responses from 1,267 Australian schools in 2014. The 2014 survey reported that "the majority of school libraries had no change to their staffing levels, and for school libraries that did change their staffing level, the more common trend was a decrease in staffing levels" (Softlink, 2014, p. 2).

Staff in Australia's Schools surveys

Commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education (and its predecessors) the Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey was first conducted in 2007. It is a teacher workforce survey, and its intention is to provide a detailed picture of the Australian teacher and school leader workforces, and to gather information to assist in future planning (McKenzie, Kos, Walker & Hong, 2008). The SiAS survey is a national sample survey of Australian primary and secondary teachers, and primary and secondary leaders. SiAS has run three times to date, in 2007, 2010 and 2013. SiAS is supported by all state and non-government education authorities and has a representative reference group. Schools are randomly selected to provide representative samples by state and sector according to location, school type and level of schooling.

The survey method permits estimation about the teacher population as a whole, allowing for a margin of error based on the sample. This kind of survey provides more certainty than opt-in, or self-selection surveys that cannot ensure a representative sample of any given population. Full details about the surveys, question design, sampling and methodology are available at https://www.acer.edu.au/sias.

SiAS questions about the library role

In each SiAS survey the term 'Library' is used in the same way as subject areas such as English or Chemistry. In 2007 and 2010 teachers were asked to indicate if they had undertaken tertiary study in 'Library' and primary teachers were asked if they specialised as a teacher in 'Library' (alongside areas such as literacy, music and visual arts). In the first SiAS in 2007, only primary teachers were asked about a library role

– whether they had studied at tertiary level, whether they had more than five years' experience and whether they had undertaken professional learning in the area within the past 12 months. In 2010, secondary teachers were also asked if they were 'currently teaching' in specialist roles which included Library as well as Special Needs, Learning Support, Behaviour Management, Career Education and Vocational Education and Training. In the 2013 questionnaire, specialist roles were separated from subject areas into their own section. The same questions were asked, except for the question on teaching methods.

Limitations

It is important to be aware of the limitations of the SiAS dataset. While it can be assumed that all respondents are teachers and that those who have responded to the appropriate questions have performed a library-based role, it is not possible to determine the number of respondents who are teacher-librarians as defined by ALIA and ASLA (2009):

> A teacher librarian is defined as one who holds recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship, defined as eligibility for Associate (i.e. professional) membership for the Australian Library and Information Association.

Weldon (2016) explains that "SiAS does not collect data on whether teachers have satisfied the qualification requirements of registration bodies in different curriculum areas. Teachers are therefore assumed to be notionally qualified if they have studied a subject for at least one semester at second year tertiary or have trained at tertiary level in teaching methodology in the subject concerned" (p. 36). From this questionnaire it is not possible to determine the specific tertiary courses undertaken by teachers who have indicated study in this area, although it is reasonable to assume that respondents have undertaken some study with library-specific content.

What SiAS says about teachers in school libraries

Following the release of the results of the 2013 SiAS survey, Dr Paul Weldon of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was contracted by a coalition of school library associations led by ALIA, to analyse data on teachers working in Australian primary and secondary school libraries using the data available in the three SiAS surveys. New analysis of the 2010 and 2013 survey responses from teachers in school libraries was undertaken. Data of interest included average years of experience, average age, gender and intention to stay in teaching. Socio-economic status (SES) and location and sector of school were also considered. Dr Weldon's full analysis was published early in 2016 titled *What the Staff in Australia's Schools surveys tell us about teachers working in school libraries* and is available at http://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/25. A summary of key findings is presented below, followed by discussion of how the library profession can use the results of this research.

The number of teachers working in a library role

Over the period 2007-2013 about four to five per cent of primary teachers were working in a library role, and about two to three per cent of secondary teachers. There is evidence of a slight decline in teachers in a library role at the primary level over this period.

Teachers in library role by type of school

Teachers working in school libraries were evenly distributed geographically and, at primary level, by sector. At secondary level there appeared to be more teachers in a library role within the government sector.

School sector is an important characteristic of the teacher workforce in Australia. At primary level, government school teachers comprised a higher proportion (70.2% in 2013) of the final weighted SiAS sample than at secondary school level (58.5% in 2013) which reflects the distribution of student enrolments across the two levels. The proportion of secondary teachers in library roles was much higher in the government sector and correspondingly lower in the Catholic and independent sectors. This difference remains unchanged across the 2010 and 2013 surveys, suggesting that a higher proportion of secondary teachers in a library role were located in the government sector.

Between 2010 and 2013 there was evidence of a greater number of teachers in library roles in high SES schools and correspondingly fewer in low SES schools.

Personal characteristics

Over 80 per cent of teachers in a library role are female. Primary teachers in a library role are two to three years older on average than the primary teacher population and secondary teachers in a library role are six to seven years older on average. There is evidence that the population of teachers in a library role is aging.

Tertiary study

About six to eight per cent of primary teachers have undertaken some tertiary study in library studies and three to four per cent have undertaken three years or more of study. At secondary level, three to four per cent of teachers have undertaken some study and about two per cent have undertaken three years of study or more.

In this report, teachers currently in a library role are considered to be out-of-field if they have not undertaken any tertiary study in the field. In 2013 over one-third of primary teachers and one quarter of secondary teachers in a library role were out-of-field.

Length of experience

Primary teachers currently in a library role have about eight to nine years of experience in that role, on average, while secondary teachers have 10 to 13 years of experience on average. There is evidence of a slight fall in the average years of experience, which may be a result of the retirement of older teachers in the role.

In 2010, the proportion of early career primary teachers in a library role was about the same as that of early career teachers in the general primary teacher population (25%). At secondary level, about 10 per cent of teachers in a library role were early career, about half of the average (20%). In 2013 the proportion of early career teachers in library roles had dropped at both primary (13%) and secondary (5%), suggesting fewer early career teachers are entering library roles in schools.

Basis of employment

About one-third of primary teachers in a library role are part-time compared to about one-quarter of the general primary teacher population. At secondary level about one-quarter of teachers in a library role are part-time compared to 18 per cent in the general teacher population. Female teachers are more likely to be part-time than male teachers so the higher proportion of teachers in a library role working part-time may be related to the higher proportion of females in this role rather than the role itself.

Satisfaction and future intentions

About 80 per cent of primary teachers in a library role intend to stay in teaching, which is the same as the proportion of primary teachers in the general population. At secondary level teachers in a library role were somewhat more likely to indicate that they intend to stay than the general population, by about six percentage points (86% of teachers in a library role compared to 80% of all teachers in 2013). A higher proportion of both primary and secondary teachers in a library role indicated that they were not planning to leave prior to retirement. Teachers in a library role were slightly less satisfied than the general population of teachers, although at both primary and secondary, over 80 per cent of teachers in a library role indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current job.

Discussion

Three significant points of interest arose in the SiAS analysis: the decline in primary school teachers in library, the move to a more inequitable distribution of teachers working in libraries in low SES compared to high SES schools; and the number of out-of-field teachers working in libraries.

Teacher numbers declining in primary school libraries

The decline in the number of teacher librarians has been a concern over a number of years. SiAS shows this to be a reality, at least in primary schools. It also provides evidence that the population of teachers in the library role is aging. This bears out the Softlink (2014) survey where 25% of schools reported a decrease in library staffing from 2013 to 2014. While the staffing at 69% of schools remained unchanged over this period, 6% of school libraries experienced an increase in staffing levels (p. 14). There is no data provided in the public Softlink report on whether the changes were in primary, secondary or combined K-12 schools.

Equity gap widening

Equity concerns arise from the data showing a reduction in teachers in a library role in low SES schools between 2010 and 2013, with a corresponding increase in high SES schools. This suggests that schools in lower socio-economic areas are bearing the brunt of a decline in teachers in a library role. Hay & Todd (2010) reinforce equity of particular importance when a library may be the source of access to technology, literature, resources and a safe space for some students (p. 33); It seems obvious that it is schools in lower SES areas where this role for the library is most imperative as students are less likely to have access to this kind of support at home or elsewhere in their community.

Out-of-field teachers in library

The SiAS analysis revealed that in 2013 over one-third of primary teachers and one-quarter of secondary teachers working in a school library role had not undertaken any tertiary study in the library field. This presents a challenge for library educators, as well as professional learning providers in the school library sector, especially when combined with the evidence that the population of teachers in the library role is aging.

On the other hand, six to eight per cent of all primary teachers had undertaken some tertiary study in library studies and three to four per cent had undertaken three years or more of study. This means there are a number of teachers who have studied librarianship at tertiary level who are not currently working in libraries. Further investigation of where these people are, and their reasons for not working in the library would be useful.

Gaps in the data

It is useful when reviewing research to consider what questions were not able to be answered in this data.

Non-teaching library staff

The most glaring gap in data we have on Australian school library staffing is the absence of data on school library support staff. SiAS surveys provide data on the teacher workforce, but there is no equivalent regular survey of support staff in Australian schools. This means that library assistants, library technicians and librarians in school libraries are not accounted for in workforce data available to the library sector. As in any library there are various functions and tasks which require people with different expertise and duties. School libraries share many functions of both academic and public libraries, however most schools do not have separate people to perform these functions. They either employ staff in a number of very part-time positions, or more often require a sole staff member to take on both professional and para-professional tasks.

State-level data

School library staffing varies significantly from state to state as was reported in submissions to the 2010 Inquiry, and by Combes (2008). National data collection can obscure issues in the smaller states and territories, and differences between schools within a state. Given that education policy is largely a state responsibility, access to state-level data on school libraries would permit further useful analysis.

School-level data

There are many variations between schools beyond state and sector. Size, location, social-economic status and local policies all contribute to different stories from different schools, particularly in regard to staffing. Size and location of their school should not determine whether students have access to a school library with qualified library staff. Accurate data is still not available showing how many Australian students are denied this access. This requires a study that collects and analyses data on library staffing at the school level which is a different methodology from SiAS.

Having the data does not in itself provide any solutions. There is another gap: the know-do gap (Bennett & Jessani 2011). This is the gap whereby people with the ability and authority to use good information to design their actions do not use that information.

Issues for the education sector

Of course, counting teachers working in Australian school libraries does not contribute to an understanding of how these staff work to improve student learning. Workforce data is only one element of the picture of school libraries. In terms of the impact of school libraries on student achievement, there have been studies in many US states replicating research into this question. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) is now looking actively at how to move this data from a set of correlation studies to the benchmarking required to support causality studies. In Australia we don't even have 'easy to count' workforce data, and are well behind the US in the stakes of definitive data on impact of school libraries.

Issues for the library profession

In considering the implications of this research there are several areas that form points of interest for the library sector. The findings on out-of-field teachers in libraries highlight significant challenges for professional associations and professional learning providers in the school library sector. Who is looking after the needs of these teachers for a practical and philosophical introduction to managing a library?

Steffen and Lietzau (2009) look at workforce patterns across librarianship giving primary attention to recruitment, retention, and retirement. For sole-person libraries in a sector without dedicated Human Resources staff, school library staff receive little support from the workplace in terms of recruitment, retention or retirement directly related to the librarianship part of their role. They look to colleagues in other schools and to professional associations for support through the stages of the work life cycle.

Recruitment tends to favour teachers who take on librarianship or teacher librarianship qualifications to become teacher librarians. As teacher registration is required in order to work as a teacher librarian, with a teaching qualification taking about 18 months on top of an existing library degree it seems to be more challenging path for librarians to take. While there are schools that take on a professional librarians without the teaching component; generally this is only an option in large schools, or schools that have covered the teaching role in other ways. Increasingly schools are ignoring all professional components of the traditional library role and are funding only the transactional elements of a library service. Of course, as in any sector, there are amazing library support staff who go way beyond the level of service that is funded. The concern is that the school or education sector have determined that funding for a professional level of library service does not fit within their priorities.

This presentation is about workforce not advocacy but it must be noted that professional associations receive reports from principals that when they have an allocation for a teacher librarian, there are no qualified teacher librarians available, or that the field of candidates is poor. This is very much a workforce issue. If there are no inspiring teachers to place in their school library, a principal will find another use for their limited funds. If students come through schools with no experience of professional library services they are not only at a personal disadvantage in future study and work, the profession is at a disadvantage in that there are no role models encouraging school leavers to select librarianship as a career.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations arise from the literature review and analysis, at both a micro and macro level. What can associations do at a local level to address the findings of this analysis and to advance our research in this area? What can governments and employers do? Where can we partner with industry?

Work together to collect, code and curate the evidence

A key recommendation must be to work at connecting up workforce and other statistics collections across the library sector, recognising that school libraries have a foot in both the library and education sectors. It is time for school libraries to be counted in the library ecosystem.

One simple strategy from an American Association of School Librarians (AASL) 2014 workshop is to develop a national clearinghouse for school library research coordinating a list of research questions and research sites, and acting as a dissemination point for research related to school libraries.

There is a growing appetite in government for open access to knowledge and research (Productivity Commission, 2016) and open data is another policy setting that could advance the library sector. The library profession can continue to push for open data that facilitates new analysis and shares the work of research.

Commission, fund and do research

To conduct research requires organisations that have an interest or a question getting involved in commissioning and funding research, or undertaking their own research where there is capacity. The fragmentation of the state school library associations and

the limited number of practitioner researchers in school libraries means national research into school libraries falls to academics in just two universities. With the increasingly casualised higher education workforce, academics are increasingly contracted for short term teaching only with no research imperative or capacity. ALIA has recognised and recently reinforced its role in research, and it seems important to ensure that school libraries are part of that research agenda. Partnering with industry is becoming a priority and ALIA could ensure it is in a position to advance this.

Looking at workforce data from a single point in time is one form of research. It enables benchmarking and the review of trends. There are other research methods that could be employed to provide a richer picture of the issues and impact of school libraries. For instance, research into the motivation of school library professionals could look at contributing factors at each of the stages of recruitment, retention and retirement.

Align research to national and local priorities

There has been a tendency to focus research activity on areas that support the sector's advocacy efforts, and to consider government (usually federally) as the target for this research and associated campaigns. As the Australian government noted in the 2010 inquiry report:

> The supply and demand for teacher librarian university courses is a matter for the tertiary sector. Professional associations and the education authorities that employ teachers, rather than the Government, play a pivotal role in building a teacher librarian workforce (House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee, 2011, p.10).

While this is a timely reminder that there are a number of players in the policy space that influence school libraries, there is still strong benefit in aligning research activity with current national, state, sector and local community priorities.

The *National Education Reform* agreement 2014-2019, provides the basis for national goals including that "Australia will be ranked, by 2025, as one of the top five highest performing countries based on the performance of Australian school students in reading, mathematics and science, and based on the quality and equity of Australian schooling." Research that ties school libraries to the equity and quality agenda would be an obvious place to start.

Teacher quality is another priority in the school education sector. ALIA's 2020 mandate for continuing professional certification parallels national requirements for renewal of teacher registration. However given there are no requirements for ongoing CPD for library assistants, library technicians or librarians working in school libraries – beyond local employer programmes - there seems to be a strong role for ALIA here. The recent ALIA (2015a) guidelines for the schools specialisation includes core competencies for teacher librarians, school librarians and library technicians in school libraries.

In March 2016, the Treasurer and Education Minister called for the Productivity Commission to undertake an inquiry into the national education evidence base. The first deliverable is to make recommendations about "the information required to provide a comprehensive evidence base to inform policy development in early

childhood and school education now and in the future." (Morrison, 2016). The Australian Government is committed to "working collaboratively with the states and territories to build a world-class education system by developing a comprehensive national evidence base to inform and help improve educational outcomes for children." Can state and territory school library professional associations commit to working nationally in relation to school library data? This small-scale jointly-commissioned project represents a positive move in that direction.

Conclusions

This research is a practical demonstration of the profession taking leadership and commissioning analysis to address long-standing gaps in the evidence-base supporting the school library sector. This study goes some way to providing evidence of trends associated with teachers in school libraries in the Australian workforce. The data provide a potential tool to advocate for planning of teacher librarianship education to maintain teacher librarians in the workforce as well as the training of additional teacher librarians. This analysis will also assist tertiary institutions, professional associations and employers to identify the type of programs necessary to support those already working in the field without qualifications.

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