A profession at the tipping point (revisited)

By Karen Bonanno

Biography

Karen Bonanno is Managing Director of Eduwebinar Pty Ltd. Karen literally lives online as an educator and consultant. Her main area of work involves planning and hosting webinars that cover primary and secondary education with specific focus on innovative teaching and learning strategies and resourcing as it applies to curriculum design and delivery.

At the end of May 2014 I stepped down as CEO of the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) after 12 years in the position of Executive Officer and then Chief Executive Officer. The vice-president, Sandy Amoore, asked me to provide a reflection on my term in office and some thoughts for the profession.

Reflection

A significant achievement during my term was the activity and engagement around the Federal Government *Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools* (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Education and Employment). For the last several years this involved joint efforts of library and school library associations, advocates and teacher librarian higher education schools contributing to research, activities and campaigns in the lead-up to the announcement of the inquiry (10 March 2010), the submission process, the public hearings, the meetings with Members of Parliament, the reinstatement of the committee (23 November 2010) followed by more public hearings, the inquiry committee report (March 2011), the analysis of the report, and the follow-up advocacy and research projects to maintain momentum and interest.

At the 2011 ASLA Biennial Conference held in Sydney, the chair of the Inquiry committee, Amanda Rishworth MP, opened the conference. I was honoured to be able to present a keynote address, 'A profession at the tipping point: time to change the game plan' (Bonanno 2011) which addressed the *invisibility* of the profession, a key aspect identified during the Inquiry, and strategies to progress forward. It is timely to revisit this thought preferably with a *glass half full* approach.

Past, present, future

The following quote from the American Library Association (ALA) President, Barbara Stripling, provides a good springboard for reflecting on the past, contemplating the present and focusing on the future.

Teacher librarians, with an awareness of the Australian Curriculum resource needs, are in a better position to purchase selectively to cater for across curriculum content relevancy.

On one hand, budget and testing pressures have led to decisions to eliminate or de-professionalize school libraries. On the other hand, the increased emphasis on college and career readiness and the integration of technology have opened an unprecedented door to school librarian leadership (Stripling 2014).

The similarities between the state of school libraries in the USA and Australia are worth considering in the context of survey findings in Australia and the Australian Curriculum.

Budget pressures
Since 2010, Softlink has been undertaking an annual survey to examine key trends and issues impacting school libraries in Australia. Annually, the findings identify positive links between school achievement in NAPLAN and well-resourced school libraries.

The 2014 findings indicate fewer schools reporting budget decreases compared to the previous year. The 2014 survey received a record of 1380 responses (biggest number since the survey commenced in 2010).

There is a slight indication that budgets are stabilising whilst there is still the need for schools to be frugal in their purchases to build the collection with limited budget allocations. Teacher librarians, with an awareness of the Australian Curriculum resource needs, are in a better position to purchase selectively to cater for across curriculum content relevancy. They are capable of getting *more bang for their buck*. In addition, they are able to leverage the contemporary features of their library management system and integrate with the learning management system to make information and resources more accessible to users.

A hybrid library (print and electronic) is becoming the reality for schools. In 2014, 22% of respondents indicated that e-book and e-resources were added to their collection, with 55% of respondents indicating 'definitely' or 'most probably'

Table 1: Change in School Library Budgets: Previous Year Comparison (Softlink 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)

Year	Increased	Did not change	Decreased
2014	19	52	29
2013	19	48	33
2012	26	52	22
2011	20	52	28

Figure 1: Comparison of Reading Literacy Results for each Year Group with Average School Library Budget, Australia 2014 (Softlink 2014)
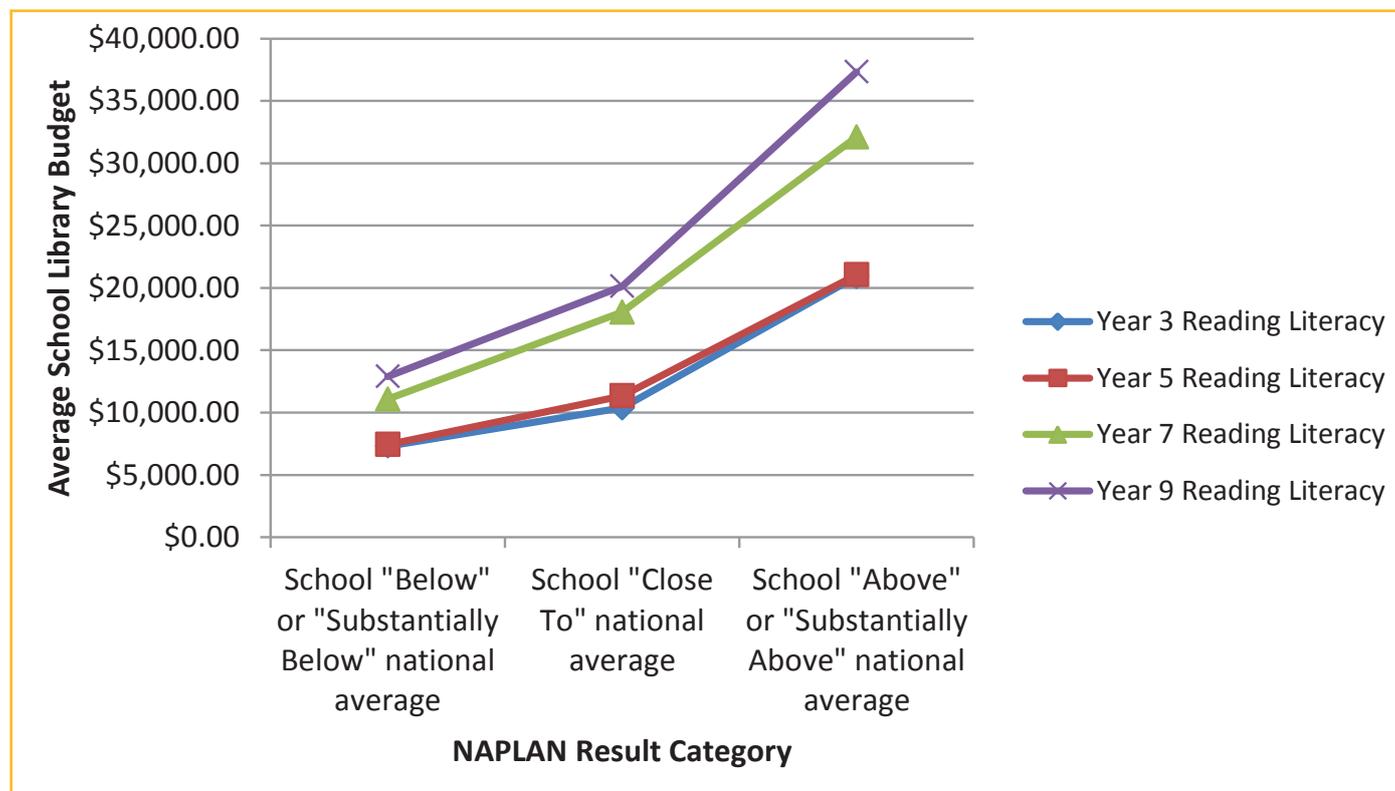

purchasing e-books within the next 12 months (Softlink 2014). Similar percentages were reported in 2012 and 2013 (Softlink 2012 & 2013). Even so, the number of e-books or e-resources only make up, on average, 5% of current collections. This scenario is also reflected in US K–12 school libraries. In the fifth annual survey, *Ebook usage in US school (K–12) libraries*, the median number of e-books per school remains low at 189 titles in comparison to 11,300 print books in a school collection (School Library Journal 2014, p.4). The lack of e-reading devices is cited as the top reason for not making e-books available. In addition, slow growth and low usage is attributed to the cost of e-books and e-readers for the school, and user preference (teachers and students) is still focused on print books for curriculum-related purposes.

Deloitte predicts that in 2015 print will generate the majority of book sales as e-book sales hit a plateau in major markets such as the UK, US and Canada (Lee *et al.* 2015, p. 38). Younger readers are still reading print as it remains the foundation of individuals' reading habits (Zickuhr & Rainie 2014).

It will be important for teacher librarians to be attentive to the immediate information needs of their school community and how they can creatively address resource provision within budget constraints. In addition, being alert to the developments and availability of relevant e-book and e-resources and how these can be acquired through local or state consortium arrangements will be advantageous. Engagement in personal learning networks or attendance at seminars/workshops on collection development, access to and dissemination of information and resources, and advanced use of features/tools of the library management system will be beneficial.

Figure 2: Comparison of Reading Literacy Results for each Year Group with Average Number of School Library Staff (Softlink 2013)
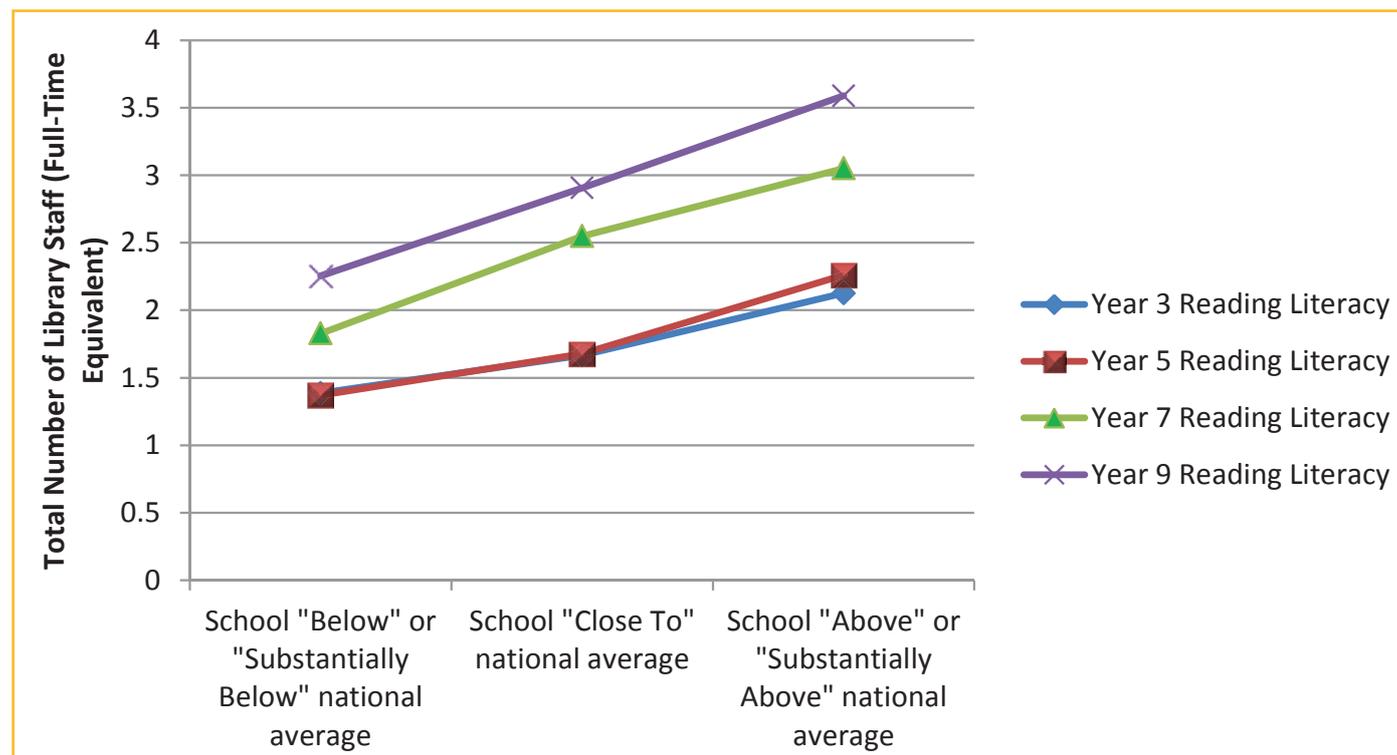
Of significant importance is the consistent need to gather evidence of practice in all aspects of the role. Evidence that is captured from within the local school community is the most relevant and pertinent information to guide the direction of the school library. It is imperative that the school library's strategic direction reflects the school's overall plan. Matching evidence to achieving the school's strategic plan can be powerful. Gillespie and Hughes (2014) provide some examples of where teacher librarians can gather evidence:

- observing students using resources for study-related purposes
- attending a formal presentation, such as a conference
- reading a scholarly articles or report
- having an informal conversation with other teacher librarians or teaching colleagues

- gaining formal and informal feedback from the principal, teachers, students or parents
- documenting library usage, for example, loans and database use statistics
- engaging with an online community, for example, an online forum or blog (Gillespie & Hughes 2014, p. 30).

Standardised testing pressures

Each year the Softlink Australian School Library survey results (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) identify a positive correlation between:

1) School library budgets and literacy levels, and

2) School library staffing and literacy levels.

The findings support the position that well-funded and adequately staffed school libraries directly impact student achievement.

Table 2: School Library Staffing Trends: Previous Year Comparison (Softlink 2012, 2013, 2014)

Year	Increased	No change	Decreased
2014	6	69	25
2013	9	63	28
2012	9	69	22

The Library industry outlook (University of Southern California 2015) predicts growth at a slower pace between 2012 and 2022 for the library and information science (LIS) sector and, as library users expect more technological services, identifies growth areas for employment. New jobs will emerge in the LIS sector, for example, information systems manager, data curators and managers, data preservationists, digital asset managers.

Across Australia, in the last five years, there has been a drop in the number of library and information professional positions in the workforce (Australian Library and Information Association 2014a, p. 12). The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) predicts there will be competition for jobs and indicate a modest increase in the number of positions available over the next five years, especially as baby boomers retire.

Within the Australian schools the following full-time equivalent (FTE) staff numbers have been identified:

K–12 school libraries had the highest number of FTE staff with an average of 3.46 per school. The average for secondary school libraries was 2.96. FTE staff for primary school libraries was 1.52. These averages are slightly higher than findings in 2013, which appears to be a result of the larger sample size (1380 as opposed to 800) (Softlink 2014).

Some of the specialist skills teacher librarians bring to the role, as identified in the *Future of the library and information science profession: school libraries*, include:

- understanding learners and their needs
- collaborating with teachers to plan and implement information literacy and literature programs
- ensuring the school library collection supports the school curriculum and community
- using technologies as teaching and learning tools
- creating effective learning environments
- participating in the school and wider learning community (ALIA 2014b, p. 3).

As new roles evolve and users expect more technological services, there will be a hiring trend towards finding staff with a strong digital or technology background (Johnson *et al.* 2014a, pp. 22¬–23). As schools incorporate new technologies and methods into teaching and learning there is a need for teacher librarians to ensure their knowledge and skills are kept up to date. Ongoing education and continuing professional learning will be extremely important in a tight and competitive market.

The vast majority of parents of children younger than 18 feel libraries are very important for their children.

Parents indicate libraries are important because they:

- help their children to develop a love of reading and books
- provide their children with access to information and resources not available at home
- are a safe place for children
- offer programs and classes for children and teens (Miller *et al.* 2013).

As a result, these parents are more likely to be strong advocates for retaining or expanding the school library space and services. 'Parents will be the most effective advocates for investment in school libraries and it will be essential for the future success of school libraries to raise awareness of what can be achieved with a well-staffed, well-resourced library' (ALIA 2014b, p. 10).

Teacher librarians must be able to address the development of new literacy skills so that students can evaluate and make sense of text in all formats and be creators and communicators of their ideas and thoughts. Providing the resources, tools and programs, physically and virtually, is an all-encompassing task for the teacher librarian. Again, attention to capturing evidence on student engagement with the resources, tools and programs, provided by and through the school library, will be necessary for future sustainability of the profession.

Career and college readiness
The Young Adult Literacy Services Association (YALSA) forum report (Braun *et al.* 2014) indicates that today's teens will need to have a skill set that goes beyond the traditional academic skills. The report states that the expanded skill set 'includes learning and innovation skills (that is, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and

collaboration), and information, media and technology skills (that is, information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, and ICT literacy)' (Braun *et al.* 2014, p. 3). Many of these skills are at the core on the inquiry skills strands in the Australian Curriculum. Teacher librarians are well placed to address the integration and delivery of these skills, either through collaboratively developed classroom programs or library programs and services. They can help to identify a pedagogical framework to support the development of skill acquisition, build staff competencies in new literacies, design and deliver classroom programs to support effective teaching and learning of future skills, and provide creative and innovative learning spaces and environments.

Integration of technology
Bring your own device (BYOD) has been identified as a digital strategy that will have an impact on schools and school libraries over the next couple of years (Johnson *et al.* 2014b, pp. 34–35, Softlink 2013, pp. 18–19). A mobile device becomes the tool for users to access their personal working environment and the school's learning spaces. This student-centred approach will have an impact on the information services and programs offered by the school library as students use the devices at school, inside and outside the classroom.

With a focus on future skill development and integration of technology, it is imperative that teacher librarians build their capacity to engage in and provide leadership in these areas as they relate specifically to the school library. Capacity building is a term that describes a process of equipping teacher librarians with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to address change and achieve the desired educational

outcomes. In 'Learning and literacy for the future: building capacity' three elements are presented as core to a capacity building framework for teacher librarians:

- *Professional learning:* attendance at seminars, workshops, or information session provided by another. These can be internal to the school or from an external agency.

- *Professional reading/research:* maintaining current knowledge of pedagogy, learning theories and information through access to physical or online resources.

- *Professional dialogue/practice:* either an informal or formal discussion/ conversation or activity about knowledge and practice learnt from professional learning or reading with other professionals (Wall & Bonanno 2014, p. 23).

Play it forward

Keeping up to date is one of the main challenges facing any professional. The top three preferences of members of professional associations to receive information to help them stay abreast of developments in their respective profession are email, industry journals, and conferences/seminars/ meetings (Survey Matters 2013, pp. 55–57). Online media options that are actively used to seek information about their profession include the associations' website, searching Google, webinars/podcasts, LinkedIn, Facebook, blogs, Twitter (Survey Matters 2013, pp. 58–59).

Many within the school library profession engage in these channels of communication. In developing the literacy skills of young people so they become productive consumers and creators of information, the professional needs to adopt a similar

process; be consumers as well as contributors to the ongoing professional conversation to sustain the viability of school libraries and teacher librarianship.

With a *glass half full* approach, share your experience and evidence, challenges and solutions, professional learning reflections and thoughts, advocacy activities and ideas, and school library programs and services using the identified channels of communication that professionals prefer to keep up to date and stay abreast of the happenings within the education sector.

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