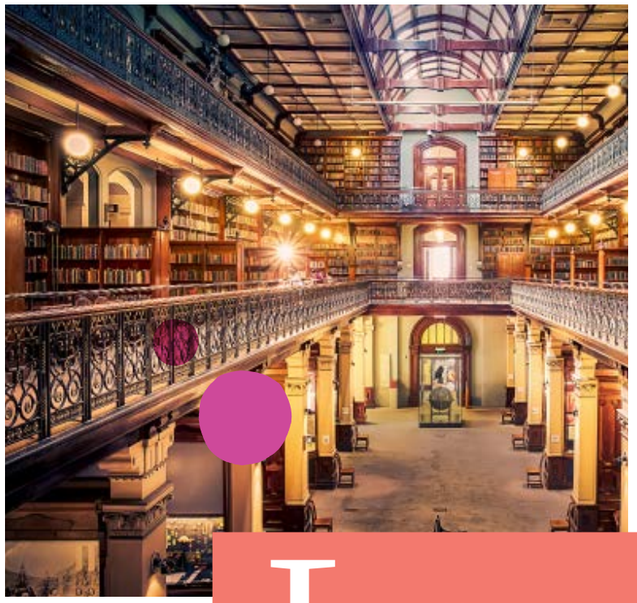
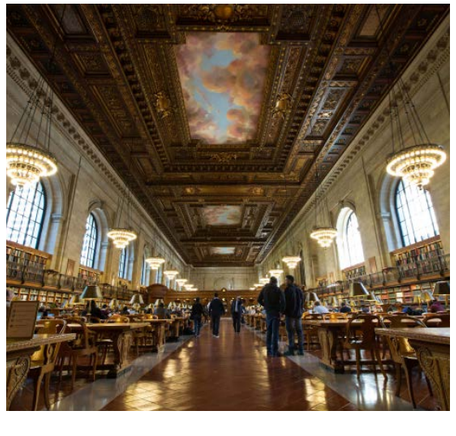


Love of Libraries



Libraries empower and educate our kids, so why are our school libraries in crisis? Anastasia Safioleas investigates.

AS A YOUNG girl growing up on the outskirts of Brisbane, children's book author Jackie French didn't have a lot of luck when it came to libraries. Her first school burned down, taking with it the one shelf of books that constituted its entire collection. Her new school fared a little better. At least it had a library, but French soon read everything and ran out of books to borrow. So she headed to her local library, only to be told she wasn't allowed to borrow the books she wanted because she was too young. Testament to her tenacity, she eventually found a way in.

"One very nice librarian pretended not to see me so I could actually sit in the aisles and read the things I wanted to read," French says on the phone from her home in Araluen, NSW.

This small gesture – a librarian clearing the way for a young child to satisfy her thirst for books – proved decisive for French. Today, she is the author of more than 200 books (including the much-loved *Diary of a Wombat* and *Pete the Sheep*), and a tireless advocate for children's literacy. But along with many other authors and advocates, the one-time Children's Laureate is alarmed by the demise of the school library and with it, the beloved teacher-librarian.

"There is an epidemic of library closures and it is hidden," says French, "often because the principals don't acknowledge it themselves that they have destroyed the library by getting rid of the qualified staff or by locking the door."

Across Australia, the number of teacher-librarians – a qualified teacher who also holds a librarianship qualification – in primary schools has dropped significantly. Regular surveys conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research across government, independent and Catholic schools have found while there were 5600 librarians teaching in primary schools in 2010, by 2013 there were just 1300. Comparatively, the decrease in music teachers (another specialist area) has been less pronounced, from 5200 teachers in 2010 to 4000 in 2013.

Talk to the parent of a school-aged child and you'll discover that teacher-librarians in public schools are a rarity. School libraries are being downsized, or are under-resourced, or are run by unqualified staff. And this is fast becoming a problem. It's long been established that a healthy school library directly contributes to higher literacy rates among children. For many, the library is their only gateway to a digital world. For others, it's a refuge from the schoolyard bullies, a welcoming safe space. A library provides much more than merely books and a quiet space to read them in.

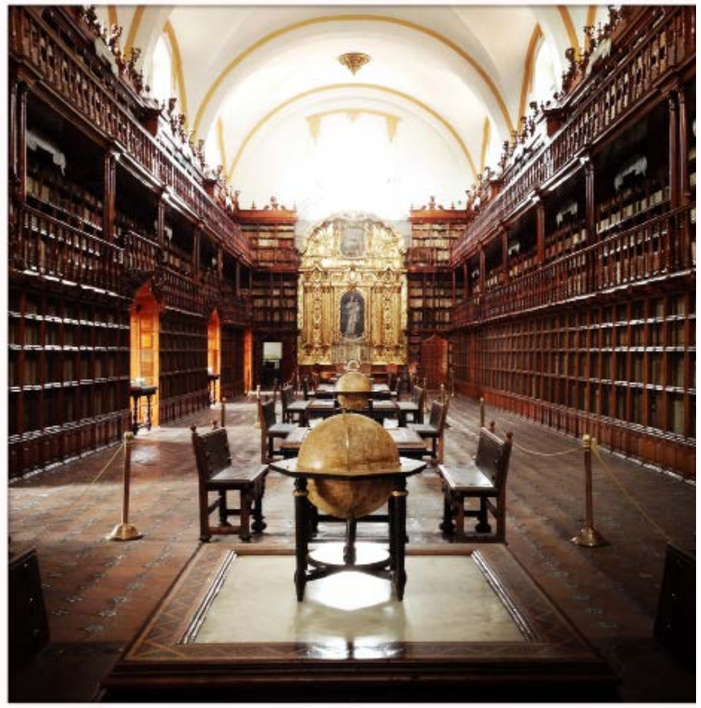
According to teacher-librarian and Students Need School Libraries campaign coordinator Holly Godfree, library professionals in schools have recognised for many years that their numbers are declining and are increasingly alarmed about what this means for students. Their campaign's aim is simple: for all children to have access to quality school libraries run by qualified librarians.

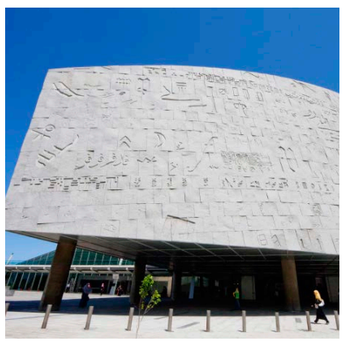
"When I read about how Australia's PISA results are in decline; about the future workforce and what skills will be required; misinformation in the news and how that affects democracy; teacher workload and current debates in education about the need to improve how we assess learning and the need to individualise student learning – all of these things are deeply embedded in school library services. So, the fact that they've generally been in decline around the country is cause for alarm," says Godfree.

Those PISA results, from the Programme for International Student Assessment, will be released later this year; they are from a worldwide study conducted by the OECD every three years to evaluate 15-year-old school students' aptitude in maths, science and reading. And all eyes are on Australia's ranking. Since PISA's inaugural survey in 2000, we've been scoring progressively worse when it comes to our children's reading performance – from fourth in 2000 to 16th in 2015. Countries currently outranking Australia include Canada,

PHOTOS BY GETTY

LIBRARIES AROUND THE WORLD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE; COPENHAGEN UNIVERSITY HUMANITIES LIBRARY; PALAFOXIANA LIBRARY, PUEBLA, MEXICO; TAMA ART UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, TOKYO, JAPAN; NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY; JOSE MARTI LIBRARY, SANTA CLARA, CUBA; NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA, BEIJING – THE LARGEST LIBRARY IN ASIA.





MORE LOVELY LIBRARIES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
PALAFOXIANA LIBRARY, PUEBLA, MEXIO – THE OLDEST PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE AMERICAS; AL-QARAWIYYIN LIBRARY, FEZ, MOROCCO – THOUGHT TO BE THE WORLD'S OLDEST LIBRARY; MODERN LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT; MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP LIBRARY, THAILAND.

Estonia, Ireland, Japan and South Korea.

But what do school libraries have to do with Australia's literacy ranking? Quite a lot. Strong evidence-based research has shown that if your child's school has a great library staffed by a qualified teacher-librarian who collaborates with the teaching staff, this will have a positive impact on student literacy. A direct link between library budgets and NAPLAN results was reported by a 2016 Softlink study – as library funding increases, so do NAPLAN results. Why? Libraries and teacher-librarians develop a healthy reading culture within schools, and when students read, their vocabulary, grammar and general knowledge expand. And the very nature of a library's common space means collaboration, creativity and knowledge creation flourish among students *and* teaching staff.

Good early literacy development is vital to later academic success, but literacy is also an important life skill beyond the classroom. Being literate doesn't just mean the ability to read a book; literacy skills give people the ability to manage everyday tasks, to access information and to communicate ideas. Alarmingly, 44 per cent of Australians aged 15 to 74 have low literacy skills, according to the latest ABS and OECD data. This means 7.5 million Australians are much more vulnerable to social and economic disadvantage.

Nowhere is Australia's poor literacy rate more stark than when it comes to the Indigenous student population. According to PISA's 2012 results, Indigenous students are at least two-and-a-half years behind their non-Indigenous peers. The 2017 NAPLAN results paint an even grimmer picture, with only 34 per cent of Indigenous Year 5 students in very remote areas at or above national minimum reading standards, compared to 95 per cent for non-Indigenous students in major cities. According to a House of Representatives education committee report from 2011, there are no teacher-librarians in community schools in the Northern Territory.

The Indigenous Literacy Foundation is working to improve resources.

Over Dewey

EVERYONE KNOWS THE Dewey Decimal System, except that its proper name is the Dewey Decimal Classification, which must have driven Melvil Dewey, its creator, mad. Actually, it was almost the Dui Decimal System. As well as reforming libraries, Dewey wanted to reform spelling. So he changed his name, Melville Dewey, to Melvil Dui. The forename stuck, the surname didn't.

Born in New York in 1851, Dewey knew from a young age what he wanted to do. While still a university student he started a company that made library index cards and the wooden cabinets in which to store them.

He became, of course, a librarian, and reformed the classification of books, using as his template the categories of knowledge first devised by philosopher-scientist-politician Francis Bacon.

Before Dewey, libraries commonly stacked books according to two principles: the order in which the books were acquired, and their size. Anyone familiar with the "F" in a card catalogue index number – standing for "Folio" – knows that libraries still have special shelves for big books. Stacking books chronologically wasn't such a problem when the public did not have direct access to the shelves, which had been the case for millennia, but things were changing with the advent of public libraries, and Dewey was the man to solve that problem.

The system follows various patterns. The 10 principal groupings (numbers 100, 200 and so on) are further divided into 10 sub-groupings (110, 120), which likewise can be divided into a further 10 groupings (111, 121), and after that decimal points can be added, for ever smaller categories.

The decimal system meant the library was infinitely expandable, so a number can be created for things that did not exist in Dewey's time, such as computers, astronauts and Britney Spears albums.

But the system was also a product of its time – white, Western, male, Christian and straight. The 200s are for religion – and all the numbers up to 290 are for Christian categories. No other religion gets a look-in until Zoroastrianism (295), then Judaism (296) and Islam (297). All other religions get squeezed into 299. Homosexuality used to be classified under 301.4157, a subdivision for "abnormal sexual relations". Not cool Dewey.

Dewey himself also founded a social club – which barred Jews and African-Americans. And he was a serial groper. He got busted by the American Library Association in 1905 after four complaints from female librarians while on a trip to Alaska. In the year before his death, aged 80, he paid compensation to a secretary for harassment.

by **Michael Epis**, Contributing Editor

"The very nature of a library's common space means collaboration, creativity and knowledge creation flourish."

"Apart from the historical, health, social, and educational disadvantage issues, many remote communities don't have many, if any, books," it says on their website. "The situation is improving but there is still a long way to go and the challenges are immense."

For Northern Territory-based teacher-librarian John Chisholm, while the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is pronounced, the bigger picture is slightly more complicated.

"Being remote makes things harder, being ESL [English as a Second Language] makes things harder, living in poverty makes things harder…" explains Chisholm. "These kids aren't failing because they are Indigenous, although the system may be failing them because they are Indigenous. In Australia it is probably only our remote Indigenous communities where this intersection of problems occurs, and our education systems are ill equipped to manage that."

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION and libraries might seem like polar opposites, but librarians are information specialists. In a time when information and knowledge have moved online and become increasingly difficult to navigate, we need school librarians now more than ever.

"The internet has changed how we access information and it's also changed the kinds of information that we access," Holly Godfree says. "For a lot of schools, if they don't have a strong school library all they are giving students is wi-fi. [The students] are going to have to deal with the flood of rubbish and good things mixed in. In the past we've had the publishers as the gatekeepers… If it was published in a book you know

Good Books

We take a look at those libraries with a difference, making a difference.

The Footpath Library

The Footpath Library provides a literary escape for those doing it tough. Its volunteer-run mobile library distributes new and good-quality used books to people experiencing homelessness in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. *footpathlibrary.org*

Bawurra Foundation

With a growing digital library of Indigenous stories, songs, art and languages shared by community elders and leaders, Bawurra gives students access to the rich oral history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The library is accessed via e-readers donated to school libraries in remote at-risk communities across NSW. *bawurra.org*

Street Library

There are more than 1150 registered Street Libraries popping up like birdhouses in front yards and nature strips around Australia, encouraging communities to read and share well-loved books – and spreading a little bit of literary joy. *streetlibrary.org.au*

Human Library

There'll be no shushing at the Human Library in Perth, which is all about "reading" people, not books. Its focus is on sharing stories and having open, discussions on wide-ranging topics with knowledgable and interesting strangers. You can choose from a range of diverse titles. *humanlibraryaus.org*

Read Along Dads

Read Along Dads makes it possible for fathers in prison to bond with their kids over a bedtime story by recording them reading a book, with the recording and book then sent to the child. It also assists many of the dads with reading, as 40 per cent of prisoners have low literacy. *readalongdads.org.au*

you could trust it. Now we don't have that gatekeeper anymore. Adults are struggling with that, too. It's a really challenging area for everyone."

Jackie French describes this as being "cast adrift in a sea of data". The modern-day librarian can not only wade through this tsunami of information, but also collaborate with the teachers to personalise learning for every student. Librarians know what books are being published, and which search engines are most reliable. The modern-day library should be able to suggest a podcast as much as the latest published book on a given subject. And as they provide this world of resources, librarians can also cater for varied abilities and cultural differences – not to mention foster reading for the sheer pleasure of it.

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IN COMPARISON TO what is going on in our schools, public libraries in Australia are thriving. Total expenditure on public libraries has increased by 17 per cent over the past five years, according to a National and State Libraries Australasia report from 2015–16. In real terms, that's more than a billion dollars in funding for public libraries around Australia, as policy-makers recognise their vital value to communities.

So why are kids' libraries and teacher-librarians being neglected? A House of Representatives education committee report from 2011 asked that very question and found the profession has been in a "state of decline for some years and, in some states, is on the brink of extinction". Individual school principals are now in charge of the financial management of their schools, which might mean neither the library nor the librarian is a priority for that particularschool community. To put it bluntly, it is up to the principal's discretion, and in the face of a variety of budgetary constraints, library services are often the first to go. This is compounded by the fact teacher-librarians are an ageing population. When teacher-librarians retire, they're often not replaced.

The downsizing has also impacted school book suppliers. Australian company The Booklegger closed its print distribution business in 2017, after its sales of non-fiction books to schools fell from $1.25 million to $100,000 in six years. Its managing director Rick Sussman told *Books & Publishing* it was "due to a monumental decline in school library purchasing".

Crucially, the loss of libraries and librarians from our schools also means the disappearance of one of the few communal spaces available to children. Just like the public library is a democratic, socially inclusive space, the school library is a haven of sorts, available to all members of the school community.

"The library is a safe place," says Holly Godfree. "We offer that safety net and [the librarian is] a different type of adult that the children can relate to. One of the first things I noticed when I went from being a classroom teacher to being in the library is that the students interacted with me completely differently. It was a much more personal, warm kind of connection. Whatever their passions were, I was part of that link."

Jackie French is unequivocal about the library being a refuge for kids. "As an abused child myself, the library and books were an escape. Mrs Gillian Pauli, at the worst period in my life, gave me books every morning. Books are always with you. You have got the friends of two-and-a-half-thousand years of written wisdom."

Morris Gleitzman, current Australian Children's Laureate and author of *Once* and *Toad Rage*, perhaps best sums up the impact libraries can have on our school children: "Libraries are collections of books, and also collections of people. When the two work together, kids' lives are transformed."

by **Anastasia Safioleas** (@Anast), Contributing Editor

Book in a Visit

Elizabeth Flux weighs the joys and terrors of being responsible for someone's reading material.

THE FIRST VISIT is, to be honest, a little awkward. As a trio we are almost pathologically polite, which creates a rolling series of mini-dilemmas from the moment we knock on the door. Should we say yes to a cup of tea? Do we shake hands or hug when we leave? And, since there are only two chairs and three of us, what is to be done?

Half an hour earlier I had been handed a plastic pocket containing a library card and a piece of paper detailing my pairing: her name (Mrs H), her address (just around the corner from me) and her taste in books (crime, light romance and historical fiction).

"I think you'll be a good fit," says the librarian with a smile. She produces a canvas bag filled with a cross-section of cassettes. "I've prepared this week's, but from here on you'll be choosing." I'm suddenly filled with a nervous horror, the same kind I get every time I exit through the library's security gates and worry that somehow, somewhy, the alarm will go off and it will look like I'm thieving the novels. *Choose* someone else's *books*? That's far too much power for a 19-year-old.

The library delivery service exists so people who can't otherwise make it into the library can still access its contents. Mrs H's home is filled with details that point to her partial visual impairment – the thermometer in the cups that beeps when she makes us tea, and the landline with larger-than-usual numbers that I recognise as the same model that used to sit next to my grandmother's favourite armchair. It also takes me a moment to realise what is "wrong" with the living room arrangement – the chairs are not oriented towards the TV. There is no TV. Instead the chairs face off against one another, Mrs H's regular spot readily deduced by the crochet blanket and proximity to the cassette player.

I perch on a footrest and watch as the librarian explains the books she's selected and, also, me. "This one follows three generations of the same family who live on a farm," she says, absently flicking her long curls out of the way as she fishes through the bag. "Elizabeth is your new volunteer – one of our youngest! She's a medical student." I smile tightly and try to catch the name of the farm book, studying up so I won't get it wrong for my next visit. "This one's about a woman who goes mango picking." I glance at Mrs H's face to see if this is the kind of book that appeals.

"I'm suddenly filled with a nervous horror... Choose someone else's books? That's far too much power for a 19-year-old."

"Oh! Thank you," she says. Politeness or genuine interest? I can't tell. She would kill at cards.

Here's the routine we settled into – every two weeks I'd call and we'd work out which day worked best. Then I'd head to the library, make a beeline for the books on tape, and sift through options. The first time took more than an hour as I read blurb after blurb, shortlisted, second-guessed, re-shortlisted, overthought, and then eventually left with 10 cassettes.

"Oh! Thank you," she'd say warmly. Then we'd drink tea and have a conversation that, over the next month, would grow easier; familiarity shifting the generic in favour of the specific.

If it was a Thursday I'd know she'd had a haircut that morning. If it was the weekend she'd ask about the case I'd been studying, adding in a story if she knew anyone who had experienced the same condition.

We also, of course, talked about the books. "Oh! Thank you" was still the first response, but now it was sometimes followed by a pause and then, "I've actually read this one". There were light conversations and there were leaden ones. We talked about the novels she'd read as a younger woman, that she'd like to read again. About the chasm that I hadn't realised existed in terms of access: the books she'd like to hear but couldn't because they weren't available in audio format. Selecting started to take less time, and each fortnight I'd add in a wildcard selection – something that seemed like it might appeal, but didn't fit in specifically with the original list I'd been given.

The last visit is, to be honest, a little awkward. Because I can't remember it. Because I hadn't realised at the time that it was to be the last. There was one particular book I had been hunting down for her, unsuccessfully. It took a couple of visits to remember the title, *Polo* by Jilly Cooper. Then a few more to realise it wasn't available on tape at the library. I was still trying to see if they had it elsewhere when I got the phone call.

Every so often I spot the book, in paperback form, and think about Mrs H. And about other people like her. And about if I too, one day, will let a stranger choose my books.

» Elizabeth Flux (@elizabethflux) is an award-winning writer and editor based in Melbourne. Her short story, 'Ocarina', was published in the 2018 Big Issue *Fiction Edition.*