
Community Connections: School and Public Library Collaboration in Australia

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Introduction to the Research Problem

School and public libraries share an objective in supporting lifelong learning and literacy development of young people in their communities. In Australia, the *Standards and Guidelines for Public Libraries* (2021) developed by the Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA) and Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) explicitly state that public libraries should develop networks with schools (p. 45) and outreach activities must also address “community needs outside of physical library facilities” including schools (p. 77). Standards from ALIA and

the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) further emphasise that “Excellent teacher librarians... actively participate in education and library professional networks” (2004, p. 4).

Over the years historical documents like the Munn-Pitt Report in 1935 and Sarah Fenwick’s *School and children’s libraries in Australia: A report to the children’s libraries* in 1966 have advocated for collaborative programmes and services involving both types of libraries (Johnson, 2007, p. 8). As such, it seems obvious that library professionals working in school and public libraries should be working together; however, there is limited research around how and if these collaborations are operating. To address this gap in knowledge, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- Are there examples of current partnerships and collaborations between school and public libraries in providing services to children?
- What do school and public librarians perceive as their role in providing services to children?
- What do school and public librarians understand is the relationship between school and public libraries in providing services to children?

Literature Review

The provision and funding of library services for Australian children has fluctuated over time. Johnson (2007) highlights a chronic lack of service provision for children in the public sector at times of fiscal strain and underfunding for public libraries in the 1970s and 1980s. This same period was a hightide mark in school library development with successive waves of federal funding directed at the development of school libraries and qualifications in teacher librarianship. These shifts saw changes in the focus of public libraries’ mission to a more managerial and technological one which had an impact on children’s services in the 1990s (Johnson, 2007, p.3). However, ongoing interest in collaborative practices was evidenced through reports such as *Student usage of public libraries in NSW* (Gulburg, 1991) and *Libraries: the other classroom? A report on research into secondary student (VCE) usage of Victorian libraries* (Dowling, 1992). National and international commitments to improved literacy in the 2000s saw the pendulum swing back towards the public library as a facilitator of literacy for young people with a particular focus on early years literacy (Renshaw & Goodhue, 2020). The following decades were to see fluctuating fortunes in funding for both sectors and resultant

fluctuations in service provision. By the early 2000s, school libraries were considered in crisis, particularly in the public sector. Community action and advocacy resulted in the 2011 Committee of Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in twenty-first century Australia and its resultant report (2011, p.96).

This recognition led to greater consideration given to the relationship between public and school libraries and acknowledgement by professional associations to collaboration between the two sectors in providing services to children (Renshaw & Goodhue, 2020, p.15). However, only two studies were uncovered regarding research in this area. In the early 1980s, Vincent reported on six case studies of teacher librarians who noted “sharing common professionals goals” with public libraries but saw collaboration as a “low priority” (p.39). Bundy conducted a study in 2001 surveying Australian public and school librarians to better understand their relationship and status of collaboration. In that work, Bundy (2002) posited that the individual and co-operative performance of school and public libraries during the formative childhood years was critical to ongoing development in literacy and learning and the development of critical information literacy skills needed in the twenty-first century (p.47). This served as the foundation for the present study.

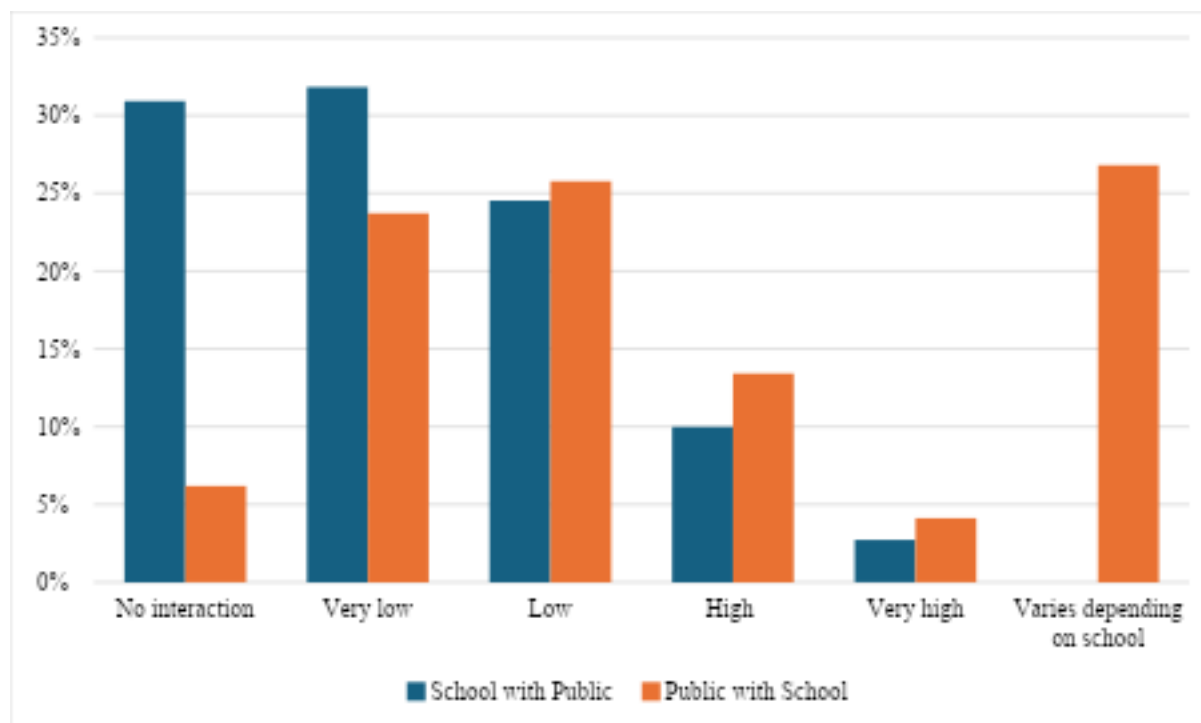
Methodology

Our study replicated the methodologies employed by Bundy (2002) to establish the status of public/school library co-operation. This included disseminating two questionnaires: one designed for staff in school libraries and the other for public library staff. The surveys included 13-14 questions with basic demographic questions relating to participants’ role in the library, experience, library type and location, modified Likert-scale questions contextualised for the sector group, and open-ended opportunities to provide more information related to each question including examples, suggestions and issues related to co-operation. Participants were recruited through professional library associations in Australia and our personal networks using listservs, email lists, newsletters and social media posts.

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

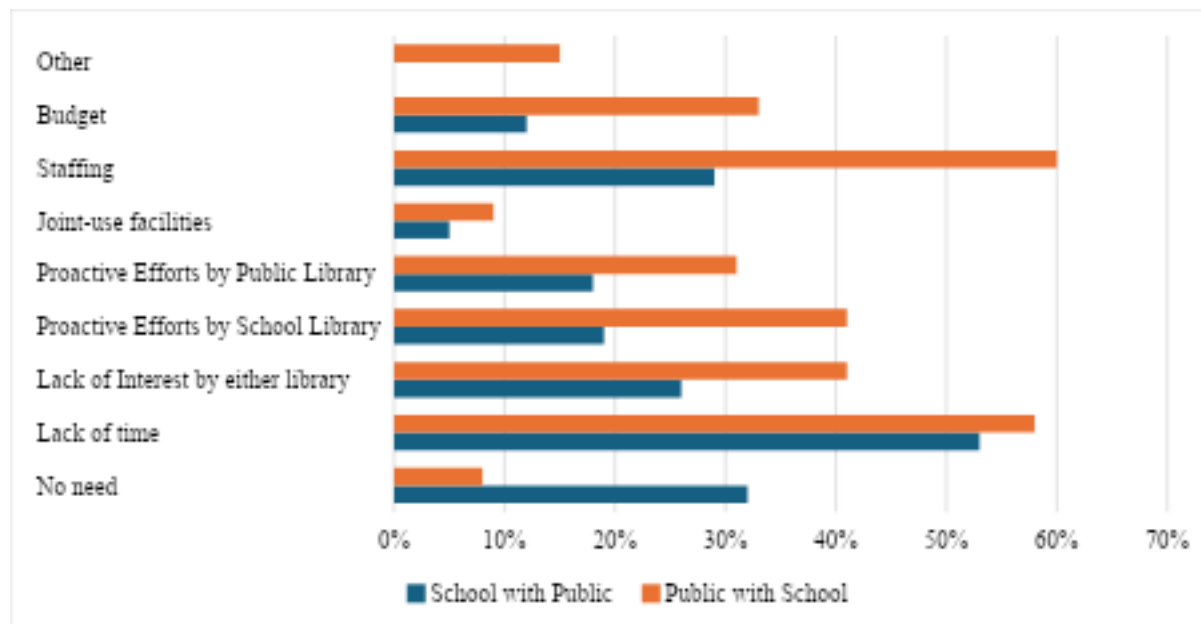
Preliminary findings from 119 public library and 120 school library respondents from mostly outer or inner suburban areas or regional cities across Australia, but mostly from the three more populated states New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Just over half of the public librarians were working in branch libraries (57%) while just over half of the teacher librarians were working in non-government (53%), secondary schools (54%). The current level of interaction between libraries is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Current Level of Interaction between Libraries



Examples of activities of public libraries with school libraries include mobile library visits, outreach programs with literacy/event focus, and early childhood literacy programs. Examples of activities of school libraries with public libraries include teacher librarians encouraging students to seek resources the school is unable to provide, shared author visits, and research sessions for senior students. The results shown in Figure 2 note some factors impacting interactions including “No need” for it as ticked by 32% of school librarians and 8% of public librarians. This is a similar sentiment uncovered by Vincent (1983), 40 years prior to this study.

Figure 2. Factors Impacting Interaction



Implications and Conclusions

Further analysis will explore how public and school library staff perceptions have evolved since Bundy (2002). They may enrich knowledge of contemporary collaborations between school and public libraries in Australia and generate evidence to inform professional practice and values in the field with a shared vision to promote “the best outcome for our children” as one public library respondent noted.

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Biographies

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Dr Kay Oddone is a Lecturer and course director for the Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship). Her research focuses on information and digital literacies, personal learning networks and teacher librarianship.

Krystal Gagen-Spriggs is a lecturer and PhD candidate with the School of Information and Communication Studies at Charles Sturt University. Krystal's research is in reading motivation, identity, and cultures.

Recently retired **Associate Professor Mary Carroll** researches the role libraries, information and information agencies play in addressing equity, promoting social inclusion and influencing broader social issues.