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Upgrade your qualifications: taking up the challenge of post graduate study

*In this article, **Jenny Scheffers** encourages her fellow teacher-librarians to upgrade their professional qualifications. For Jenny, now in her first year as teacher-librarian at Merrylands East Public School, post graduate study opened many doorways, and assisted the implementation of some very practical changes to two schools' teaching and learning programs. Scan congratulates Jenny on her recent graduation with distinction from a Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship) course.*

Despite numerous obstacles, I summoned up the courage in 1995 and commenced post graduate study in teacher-librarianship through Charles Sturt University. Contemplating enrolling in a post graduate course is daunting enough, but it is especially so if:

- you haven't studied for fifteen years
- you have three young children under the age of ten
- you have regular supply casual teaching responsibilities, and
- your husband has an incurable disease (lupus) which requires regular medical and hospital treatment.

However, resolutely, I commenced the Graduate Diploma (Teacher Librarianship) course, which is available to three-year trained teachers. In 1996, the Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship) course, which is offered only to four-year trained teachers, was introduced and I converted to it. The courses are conducted via distance education and generally take two years, part time, to complete. Each course involves eight course-based subjects and two practical subjects.

Although I originally doubted my ability to study successfully at such a high level, I also felt a very strong inner determination and the need to develop myself professionally. I had been working as an untrained casual teacher-librarian (one day per week) and as a casual classroom teacher for several years, since resigning to raise my family. I was now seeking greater job satisfaction and security. The course would not only provide me with the skills and knowledge to manage a resource centre effectively, but would assist me in obtaining a permanent appointment. This was especially important for my family's long term financial security, as my husband's state of health, and ability to work, was always uncertain.

At the start of 1996, I successfully applied for a sponsorship with the then Department of School Education. Around the same time, the principal at Marayong Heights Public School offered me a supply casual position as teacher-librarian. The principal considered me suitable because she was aware that I was completing teacher-librarian studies. I was employed in this position for two years (1996-97).

Do the benefits outweigh the difficulties?

Naturally, there are some hurdles associated with upgrading one's qualifications, including:

- a constant and demanding course workload, including extensive readings and two or three assignments per subject
- having to establish new study routines and become familiar with university procedures and lecturers' expectations
- the changing priorities with respect to family, work and study commitments
- having to place your family and social life on hold. (I soon became accustomed to late nights, less family time and a messy house!)

However, I firmly believed, and still do, that the considerable long-term, personal and professional benefits of study far outweigh these short-term difficulties. My outlook and experience has been greatly enriched. For example, during the course, all of the latest teacher-librarian issues were addressed. Areas covered included: collaborative planning, programming and teaching (CPPT); information technology; library management; and collection development.

I found the readings and assignments to be most relevant to my everyday role as a teacher-librarian. Whilst completing my study, I was able to put into practice at Marayong Heights many of the skills and knowledge I was acquiring through my assignments, particularly the introduction of CPPT strategies, and the development of the school's selection and circulation policies.

From my personal experience, principals, executive staff and other colleagues seem to regard you more highly if they know you are undertaking, or have completed, your professional training. They are also more inclined to support any changes you wish to introduce.

The optional residential schools offered by Charles Sturt University also provided valuable opportunities to meet fellow students and lecturers. My computer skills also improved dramatically as a direct outcome of word processing my many assignments. With the culmination of each subject, the sense of self achievement became greater; the 'light at the end of the tunnel' became brighter.

My husband's untimely health problems certainly added significant strain to my study. However, the course served as a valuable distraction from our turmoils. Somehow I managed to organise my study time around hospital visits and other family and work commitments.

Putting study into practice

Darelyn Dawson stated in Scan vol 1 no 3 (1997, p 15) that it was a challenging prospect to establish one's reputation as an effective teacher-librarian in a new environment. Certainly, my post graduate training has empowered me with the latest skills, knowledge, vision and confidence, enabling me to work as an effective change agent at both Marayong Heights and my new school, Merrylands East Public School. Both libraries have been involved in (almost identical) transformations; they are now vital and dynamic centres of teaching and learning, where students are developing skills for life-long learning.

I shall briefly outline the way in which Merrylands East's library program has changed since the start of this year:

Currently, about thirty percent of my teaching time is allocated to release from face-to-face (RFF) teaching duties and the remaining sessions are flexibly timetabled. The principal was very supportive of my plans to introduce modifications to the library program and, in Term One, I successfully trialed an author study of Nadia Wheatley with an enthusiastic classroom teacher. This was the first time that this classroom teacher had worked collaboratively with a teacher-librarian.

At planning meetings:

- teaching and learning activities were discussed
- responsibilities of both the classroom teacher and the teacher-librarian were allocated
- student and staff evaluations of the unit were designed
- resources were examined
- the concepts of CPPT, resource-based learning, information skills and flexible timetabling were explained.

This was a fully integrated unit. A literature study of Nadia's work was to be conducted in class, and a biographical study of the author was carried out during library sessions. The class had a regular, team taught session in the library every week, for a period of six weeks. I also continued the unit during the weekly RFF lessons.

In pairs, students developed their information skills by selecting, recording and organising biographical data about Nadia, and then presented oral and written factual reports. The sharing sessions, which were held at the end of each lesson, provided valuable opportunities for both students and staff to openly express their feelings about the unit. At the conclusion of the unit, staff and students completed written unit evaluation sheets. These were collated and presented to the class for further discussion.

As recommended by Schmidt (1990, p 20), our successful results were presented jointly at a staff meeting. I outlined the overall value of CPPT and information skills, and the classroom teacher explained the planning process we had undertaken, the unit itself and the evaluations. Students' working drafts and word processed reports were also on display.

Several other teachers, including support staff, were now interested in working collaboratively with me as a direct outcome of this staff inservice. In Term Two, we commenced work on four CPPT units, involved seven classroom teachers, an RFF teacher, two English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and one student teacher! These units were:

- Early Stage 1: *The farm* (six classes)
- Stage 2: *An author study of Babette Cole* (two classes) and an *Outer space* unit (one class)
- Later Stage 2: *Mini-beasts* (two classes).

Eleven classes, out of a total of fourteen, were now trialing CPPT units and the flexible library sessions were fully booked out. The school's resource centre was never busier. Staff and student perceived notions of the role of the teacher-librarian have changed. I know I am valued by my colleagues as an equal and valuable teaching partner. Clearly, one successful example of collaboration had become the catalyst for gaining widespread support for the library program. Margaret Eden once said, in *Scan* vol 7 no 2 (1988, p 13), "By influencing a few, you will be reaching many" and it is still true.

Hopefully, in the near future, the demand for collaborative planning and team teaching will provide the impetus to further expand the flexible component of the library's timetable.

"I am only one, but I am one, and what I do makes a difference" (Gordon, 1998). Teacher-librarians considering meeting the challenge to upgrade their qualifications have my strongest encouragement. I have proven to myself, and others, that it is possible to successfully complete such training, even under extreme pressures. The benefits of study are not only personal; they flow directly onto the whole school community.

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