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Hon Steve Maharey
Minister of Education
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Dear Mr Maharey

Students' declining information literacy skills levels

The School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (SLANZA) is most concerned about the continuing decline in students' information skills as seen in the results of the latest assessment, published recently in the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) (Flockton & Crooks, 2006).

This is a truly alarming report in that it demonstrates that there has been no improvement, or very little in students' information skills since 1997 when the NEMP assessment was first carried out. In fact it could be seen that these skills levels are declining.

This is despite the emphasis that recent government documents have placed on students gaining these skills:

1. The *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) stated that all students would develop a set of essential skills during their years of schooling in order to develop into life-long learners (p7)
2. Information literacy is one of the six guiding principles in *The school library and learning in the information landscape: Guidelines for New Zealand schools* (Ministry of Education & National Library of New Zealand, 2002, p11).
3. Information literacy skills while not explicitly mentioned in the *New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for consultation* (Ministry of Education, 2006a) are implicitly understood as underpinning the Key Competencies. The document's vision also states that students are to be 'equipped to participate fully in New Zealand society and contribute to the growth of its economy' and that 'Education is the key to sustaining our nation's development and to its successful transformation in a knowledge-based society' (p8).
4. The draft *Digital Strategy* (2004) mentioned information literacy and the importance of information literate citizens several times. While the *Digital Strategy* (2005) does not specifically use the term, it does imply the same situation, stating that 'To become a true Knowledge Society, New Zealand needs to focus on information-rich activities: those in which we create, collect, manage, process, store, move or access information via a networked environment' (p.11).

Unfortunately no mention has been made in any of these documents of how such skills are to be developed.

It must be acknowledged that the recently published document *Enabling the 21st century learner: An e-learning action plan for schools 2006-2010* (Ministry of Education, 2006) does actually include some actions for achieving stated outcomes. For example after the outcome 'Teachers have the confidence and capability to effectively integrate e-learning into their professional practice', actions include supporting National Library professional development that is 'focused on information management,

information literacy and access' (p11). This is indeed encouraging to read but much more needs to be done.

Defining Information literacy

To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Information literate people are those who have learned how to learn.

(American Library Association, 1989).

Information literacy is 'about giving students the skills to engage with information as the basis for developing a sophisticated understanding of the world and their place in it and for becoming fully-contributing citizens'. (ERO, 2005), p1). There are many skills involved in becoming information literate. These skills, including ICT, need to be named, taught in a range of curriculum contexts and practised at all levels of the learning spiral. Teachers also need to assess skill development on a regular basis.

The current situation in New Zealand

The Education Review Office report, *Student learning in the information landscape* (ERO, 2005) found that many schools were not supporting information literacy development and the NEMP report (Flockton & Crooks, 2006) found that many students had poor information literacy skills.

The ERO report noted that

- Although some teachers were teaching aspects of information literacy, there were 'few examples of a school-wide, integrated approach' (ERO, p.57).
- 'An information process model needs to be used by all teachers in their learning programmes' (p57).

The NEMP report noted that

- Many Y4 and Y8 students found it difficult to select/reject information relevant to a topic and to make decisions or develop arguments based on that information.
- *In 1997 it was found that at least two thirds of the teams at each level were not able to sort and reject information not relevant to the specific task given. 'This was a major limitation in their work'. (Flockton & Crooks, 1997, p42).*
- More than 50% of both y4 and y8 students struggled to ask two or three 'strong questions' for an enquiry even when working collaboratively.
- *It is worrying to read that in 1997 only about 20% of students generated questions likely to produce useful information and it was noted then that 'there is substantial scope for improvement in the skills of asking appropriate questions' (Flockton & Crooks, 1997. p13)*
- Students lacked the skills of discernment and discrimination in their use of internet information.
- *In 2001 it was found that where analysis (of information) required higher levels of inference, both y4 and y8 performed much less well than where less judgement was required.*
- Few y4 or y8 students could describe a coherent process or strategy for finding and using information for a research or study topic.

It is noticeable in each of the reports, 1997, 2001 and 2005 and in most sections it is stated that fewer students succeeded in 1997 than in 2001 or in 2005 than in 2001 but that these differences are too small to be regarded as important. For example in the 2005 *Clarifying information needs* section, at y8 level three per cent fewer students succeeded in 2005 than in 2001 (Flockton & Crooks, 2006, p3). While these are trend results based on a small number of tasks, nevertheless it is rare to find any areas of improvement at all in this or the previous assessment reports. Will assessment levels continue to show a decline every four years and if so how will this affect 'our nation's development and its successful transformation into a knowledge-based society'? (Ministry of Education, 2006, p8).

Reasons for this situation in New Zealand

Not one of the above documents mentions how schools are to develop information literacy skills or the need for professional development or the need for leadership in this area. There has never been any guidance given by the Ministry of Education about school-wide planning for the development of information literacy skills or any guidance about the assessment of these skills.

Too many teachers do not have a good understanding of the concept of information literacy and too many are not explicitly teaching information literacy skills. (Moore, 2002; Probert, 2006). These skills have to be taught – they are not caught and all teachers need professional development in how to achieve this. The

situation only worsens at secondary school level (ERO., 2005; Probert, 2006) and it has also been found that students themselves do not think they are taught the relevant skills (Hipkins, 2005). There needs to be more concern for students entering tertiary level education with poor information literacy skills as seen in research carried out by Otago Polytechnic (Van Zijl, Bennett, Darling, Shields, & Bennett 2006).

Solutions

- Professional development: All teachers need professional development in information literacy and how to teach it including the use of an information processing model (ERO, 2005). National Library advisers as well as other educational stakeholders such as the University of Auckland and Unitec Institute of Technology offer professional development for teachers but until schools are encouraged to see the need, not enough will take the training with the result that skill levels will continue to slide.
- Trained teacher librarians: Employ trained teacher librarians (as recommended by PPTA, 2005) or teachers well trained in information literacy in our school libraries. School-wide information literacy development will not happen *unless it is someone's responsibility to see that it does happen*. There is evidence demonstrating that teacher librarians, librarians and teachers working together can reverse the situation. (Hannah, 2005; Stotter, 2006).
- School library teams (Moore & Trebilcock, 2003): There is much evidence now that a well managed and well staffed school library which includes trained teacher librarians or teachers trained in information literacy and qualified librarians who direct and manage libraries and their services, adds considerably to student learning outcomes (Todd, 2003; Todd, 2006; Hay, 2005). For example the school libraries involved in these research studies (Ohio, Delaware, USA; Queensland, Australia) all had qualified library staff and trained teacher-librarians who oversaw the school-wide development of information literacy both within and without the school library. As Todd (2006) asserts, 'completing this research has convinced me more than ever of the central place of the school library as a transformational bridge in the reading, literacy-knowledge life cycle of students'.

School-wide information literacy development: ERO (2005) pointed out that too many libraries had little connection with the rest of the school. By employing teacher librarians (as we used to before 1992 and as many other countries currently do) or teachers well trained in information literacy and with the time to implement a planned, school-wide policy of information literacy development, we could bridge the gap between the school library and the rest of the school. **Integration of librarians into the middle management of schools is also necessary for this gap to be bridged.** Their participation in management level planning for teaching, learning and the curriculum would place libraries in a position to maximise their positive impact on educational outcomes Ofsted (2006) We would then be able to reverse this truly dismaying trend whereby our students demonstrate decreasing skills in information literacy, the very skills they must have to function properly as life-long learners in a knowledge economy.

If such positive action is not taken to reverse this worrying trend then it is very hard to understand how the Ministry of Education will fulfil much of the vision stated in the new New Zealand curriculum document or how the key competencies will be satisfactorily implemented. These are not skills to be seen as extras, somehow standing apart from the curriculum. As the Ministry of Education has so rightly pointed out in several documents, these are core skills and essential for life in the 21st century.

SLANZA strongly recommends that this situation in schools is examined urgently and solutions found. It cannot be allowed to continue. Members of the SLANZA National Executive are more than happy to discuss the situation with you.

Yours sincerely

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