The Potential of the School Library in the 21st Century: Exemplary School Libraries Provide a Model for What Can Happen

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Introduction

Support for school libraries continues to decline in Canada, as reported by Statistics Canada (Coish 2005), resulting in lowers levels of staffing and fewer print materials. At the same time, there is a global trend that focuses on educational accountability and school reform, especially in relationship to literacy outcomes (American Association of School Librarians, 2009; Canadian School Library Association, 2003; Ontario School Library Association, 2010; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004). International research has linked the positive impact of school libraries and school librarians to higher student achievement and students' performance on standardized tests (Baughman, 2000; Baumbach, 2003; Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; OECD, PISA, 2001). Students also identify the school library as an important part of their learning experience in school (Todd, Kuhlthau, & OELMA, 2004). International studies have linked student achievement and the presence of professionally staffed and accessible school libraries. While there is a general agreement that the school library is an integral part of a school, the impact of the school library on educational outcomes has not been clearly established. As an example, research exploring the role of school libraries in supporting teaching and learning has not been completed in Canada (Haycock, 2003). Our work represents the beginning of a program of research that explores the impact of successful school libraries and students' attitudes and literacy behaviours. Through a case study approach focusing on exemplary library programs, our purpose was to better understand the impact these programs have on school practices, teaching, and students' attitudes and learning.

Method

Our research was conducted in eight elementary schools located in southern Ontario that were identified by the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) as having exemplary school library programs. The schools were from three public boards and one catholic school board, representing a large city, a midsized city, suburban and semi rural regions. We carried out two detailed case studies that included two full days observing the library program, and interviews with teacher librarians, teachers, administrators and volunteers. Six smaller case studies omitted the observations from the data collection. In each case, we interviewed teacher librarians, teachers, administrators, and volunteers. We also surveyed students from 21 Grades 4, 5 and 6 classrooms in these schools. A total of 331 student surveys were completed (41% return rate). To minimize the impact on the classroom teacher, the surveys were sent home with the students to complete. The return rate varied from 17% (13 of 75 returned) to 66% (76 of 115 returned). Thematic analyses were completed for the qualitative data and descriptive and inferential statistics were completed for the survey data.

Results

While our original intention was to identify a series of practices or policies associated with exemplary school library programs, we discovered that these exemplary programs were highly variable in their structure and function. Hence our qualitative analyses of the teacher librarians, teachers, administrators, and volunteers' interviews were combined with the observational data to then develop continuum of exemplary school library practice. We were able to identify four distinct levels of the continuum with context emerging as a determining factor. Context was not a simple set of categories, rather, it was composed of interrelated factors that interacted to facilitate or hinder the implementation of exemplary school library practices. Context included factors such as Board policy, funding and staffing models, administrative models, demographic characteristics of the school population, principal and teacher knowledge and skills, physical features of the library, history of the school library and volunteer availability. Teacher knowledge, expertise and openness were essential factors within each context that affected the impact of the school library program on instruction and learning.

Two features were common to these exemplary school library programs regardless of context: a focus on teaching and the teacher librarian as an agent of change. Within a given context, these exemplary programs had librarians who maximized the amount of teaching time they had with children, through strategies that freed time from routines and instructional collaboration. As a change agent in the school, the teacher librarian purposefully sought ways to increase the instructional presence of the school library and promote its instructional role to teaching staff in the school.

Table 1: Exemplary School Library Program Continuum

	Level 1	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**
Library's role in school	Operates within school culture	Partnerships are building	Library is central to learning	Level 3 features plus systematic support
Teacher-librarian's role in school	Seen as a secondary resource	Library is an important resource	Equal partner	
Instruction	Library has peripheral support role Parallel or independent teaching Librarian capitalizes on administrative and teacher decisions	Opportunities for teaching (but viewed as add-ons) Cooperative teaching Actively changing culture	Central role in instruction Collaborative teaching Established a new culture in school	
Program	Library "skills" some teaching is unconnected to classroom instruction	Curriculum and library instruction coordinated	Integration of classroom and library instruction Innovative, opportunistic: Finds solutions to barriers	

Administration	Library viewed as peripheral	Library valued but not seen as central to school's purpose Decision making about the library may not involve the librarian	Seen as central to school's purpose Pro-active in support of the library Shared decision making Librarian involved in school leadership Understands & values the instructional role of librarian Scheduling supports instructional role of librarian	Shared understanding across staff and system (board) of library role (as defined in level 3) System wide valuing and support for library programs (e.g., board level consultant) PD support for librarians, Librarians are required to have specialization
Finance	Library finance decided by administration. Regular allocation	Administration provides additional funding on occasion	Methods to address financial constraints as a regular part of school planning	Finances on a firm foundation

Student Perceptions

The student surveys included 6 open-ended and 27 Likert scale survey items enabling qualitative and quantitative analyses to be conducted. The open-ended questions focused on important features of the library as perceived by students (e.g., "The single best thing about our school library is..., If I could, the one thing I'd do to improve out school library would be…"). The Likert items examined frequency of activities (I go to the school library at lunch time), and perceptions of the librarian's role (The librarian helps me choose books). These items were contained within five major sections: (a) student demographics and school attitudes; (b) library activities during class time and during students' own time; (c) items used in the library and factors that help students choose books; (d) librarian characteristics and perceptions of the librarian; and (e) students' reading attitudes and perceptions of reading.

The students who completed the surveys were in Grades 3 to 8, with the majority being in Grades 4 to 6 (ages 8 to 12 years). The average age of the students was 10.4 years of age. A higher proportion of girls completed the survey (57%). Just under three-quarters of the students were born in Canada but only 50% listed English as their first language, with Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese) being the most commonly reported other language. Thus the sample generally represents the diversity of the student population found in these schools, although there were slightly more girls and fewer immigrant students than found in the actual student population of these schools.

School Profiles

When we initiated our research, it was our intention to use the students' surveys to examine the consistency of exemplary school library programs in terms of the services provided to students. However, it became clear that the context within which a school library operated also had a substantial impact in determining the manner in which students accessed and used the school library. Our analysis shifted to examining the range of uses found amongst exemplary programs through the eight case studies. The students were consistent in their praise of the school library and the teacher librarian, but the reasons for their views varied. Through the student data, we developed school profiles that illustrated the variability in these exemplary school library programs and the functions of the teacher librarians. Figure 1 contains those item related to student use of the library. Each line provides the range of student use across the 8 schools and the x gives the average level of usage, illustrating the variability students' average use of these school libraries.

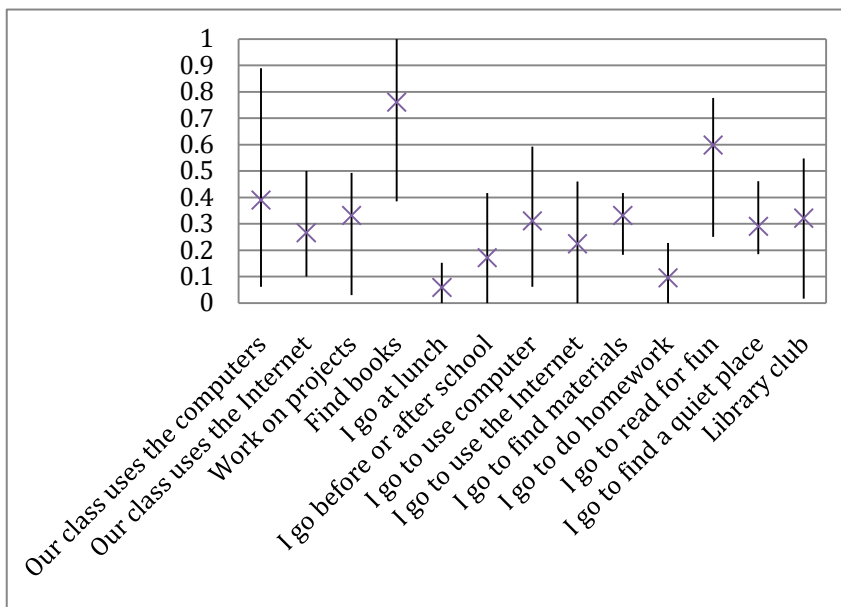Figure 1: School Variability in Students' Use of the School Library

Figure 2 provides a similar set of results based on students' perceptions of the school librarian. As described above, the vast majority of students (91%) stated they liked the librarian (agree or strongly agree). Overall, 83% of the students believe they learned a lot from the librarian, and 93% of the students believed their teacher-librarian to be knowledgeable and helpful. Not surprisingly, students were less likely to turn to the school librarian for help with homework; nevertheless, a substantial proportion of students did turn to these teacher librarians for homework help. These exemplary teacher-librarians were also important sources of learning how to conduct research, access information literacy, search the web and use databases (65%) among other visible responsibilities. Interestingly, 66% of the students reported that these teacher-librarians came to their classrooms. In contrast, a surprisingly low number of students (38%) generally believed that the teacher-librarian knew the kinds of books they like to read. This may be due to the transient nature of students' book choices, typically reflecting the most currently popular titles and formats (graphic novels).

Figure 2: Students' Perceptions of the Teacher Librarian.
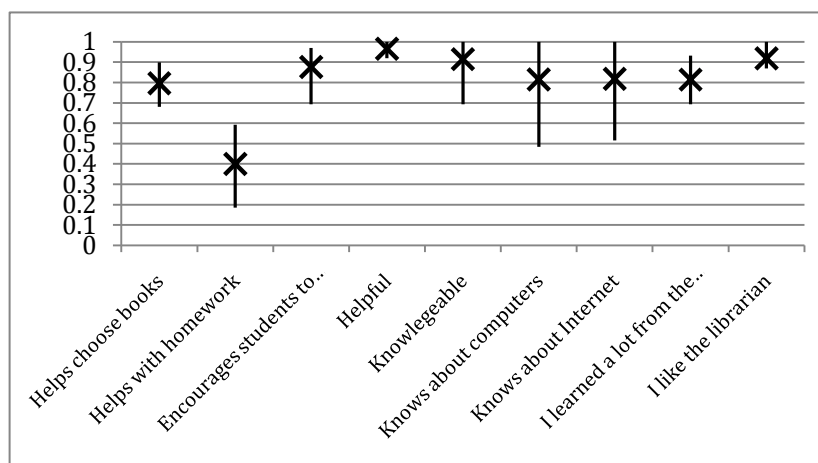
When asked about "the single best thing about our school library…" students' most frequent responses (55%) referred to the number of books available or to a specific type of book. "It has SO MANY BOOKS!" More surprising and unexpected was that the next most frequent response were statements referring to the physical space, organization or atmosphere of the library (34%). Students comments included, "there is a lot of room to read quietly;" or "everything in the library is neat and tidy." Students also had suggestions to improve the school library, most commonly focused on increasing the book or graphic novel collection (46%). Overall, these students valued their school libraries and 64% stated they would like to be able to use the library even more frequently.

The students in these schools were active readers and a large majority (76%) reported they liked to read at home and at school and thought they were "great" readers (78%). Ninety-four percent of the students had read a book for pleasure in the past month and 83% reported they had used books to help with their schoolwork. Generally, students reported reading between 1 and 12 books for pleasure (median = 5) and using 1 to 10 books (median = 3) to help with schoolwork over the past month. Asked to name their favourite book students gave a wide range of titles. The most frequently reported (61%) were works of fiction followed in frequency (20%) by graphic novels, comics and humour books.

The Important Role of School Libraries

Our findings demonstrate that exemplary school library programs are an active and valued part of schools in which they operate. These exemplary school library programs and their teacher librarians were well supported by students and teachers. Based on our findings, these teacher librarians and their library programs were exceptional. Yet, the teacher librarian continued to promote and increase the role of the school library with respect to teaching and learning. Teacher librarians made choices that enabled them to maximize the amount of time devoted to teaching within the particular context and increase students' use of the school library. Certainly, the school context either hindered or supported the amount of teaching occurring in these exemplary library programs. The more enabling contexts allowed for greater collaboration and integration of instruction on the part of the librarian and classroom teacher. Of importance for subsequent practices, we determined that the context was interactive and fluid, and it could be affected by the change efforts of the teacher librarian.

In spite of the changing roles of school libraries, students still valued the print materials that were available in the library. Of particular interest to us, these students also valued the physical space and the arrangement of the library and how this created an atmosphere conducive to students' use of the library. Again, these findings reflect important considerations for the school libraries present in our schools.

Finally, we were also able to place these school library programs along a continuum. Factors associated with the context within which the library programs functioned resulted in unique programs and formed the basis for the levels of the continuum. The continuum served to highlight the ongoing challenges that school libraries face. Even these exemplary school library programs faced ongoing limitations and none of these school library programs were found to be functioning at the highest level of the continuum. Instead, there were libraries that had only part time librarians with limited budgets, and others who were mostly responsible for prep coverage with little time for working with students. A few of the school library programs did have a fulltime teacher librarian who had additional funding and was able to teach and collaborate extensively with classroom teachers. Yet even in these situations, the teacher librarian believed there was a need to continually increase the presence of the school library in order to prevent the loss of time available for a teacher librarian.

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