

The School Library as Community Centre

By Frank Loreto

The borderline autistic girl laughs out loud as she reads a Manga book. Two students come in looking for bus tickets; four others want Bristol board, paper, scissors and glue; several others need old newspapers for an assignment; one needs a note to get back into class; the office calls to see if a student is in the library instead of class; another student is wondering if being bi-sexual is okay; one wants to talk about today's news; another is hoping that we found a cell phone; "Can you look over this paper—it's due next period"; "Do we have a colour printer?"; "How do I photocopy two sides?"; "The file with my essay has disappeared, can you get it back?" -- the list goes on and first period hasn't even started yet.

The school library, while designed to assist students and staff with curriculum assignments, does far more each day than simply satisfy the needs of the curriculum. The high school library is a gathering place, a safe-house, a refuge, a hiding place, a place of answers, a social centre and again the list goes on. Because none of these functions can be assessed by any form of standardized testing, there is no way of showing the true value of a school library. For this reason, the library is often misunderstood and seen as an easy target of budget cuts.

The purpose of this paper will be to show that teacher-librarians must fight even harder to make the school library the hub of the school. While all our efforts may be in vain, what we do has more value than administrators would like to admit. For the students, for the time left that we may have, we must make the library central to their high school experience.

When I was appointed Library Department Head over 20 years ago, the principal asked me how I liked retirement. The role of teacher-librarian is easily one to be envied. We read books and do some things with the students. How hard can that be? We have no marking and far fewer classes to prepare for, so to our peers, we have it made. In some ways we truly do. We are not tightly bound by a standard curriculum; we can only help students if they use us properly, and best of all we do not have marking. However, we do have the obligation to make the school library a vibrant, happening place where students want to be. For this reason, we often have to go beyond our contracts and put the students first.

When I first went into the library, I was also teaching English. One day, one of my students came to see me to hand in an assignment. To do so, she had to walk to the centre of the library. The look on her face made it clear that she had never ventured

this deeply into the library before. "Look at this place", she said, "It's crawling with browners!" My job was to "de-browner" the library and make it not just an okay place to be, but somewhere students wanted to come to.

If the library is to be the hub of the school, the trick would be to get kids to come in. Once in, a number of delights should await the students. However, they have to physically come in. One of our first steps was to keep the library doors open at all times. This seems like a simple thing, but it speaks volumes about the welcoming aspect of the library. Sometimes, the effort to open a door is enough to deter a student who has never gone in before. Often a student will come near the entrance and seems to be waiting for the invitation to come in before actually doing so. We do that daily and sometimes the offer is accepted. With the doors closed, we would not be able to see what is going on outside the library.

I wanted to make the library a place where students have to come whether they initially want to or not. Our school insists that the locks be purchased from the school. I suggested to the main office that we be the place where students buy their locks. While this is a pain-in-the-neck job, it gets all the grade nines into the library early so the library staff gets to meet them and hopefully show that we are a fun bunch of folks. As many Grade 9s cannot figure out how to work the combinations, the library staff gets to save the day and the first encounter is a good one. We also house the combinations to all the school locks, so when a student forgets his or her combination (which happens quite often) they come to us.

I suggested that those students with first period spare should call the library their home room. As a result, all guidance appointments, report cards, timetables for those students are delivered to the library. We are the only place in the school that gives change. We are the lost and found. We distribute yearbooks. As Graduation chair, I am the information source of all things graduation. I have made the library the place to find answers. I also compose the daily PowerPoint presentation that runs over the school television announcements, so I have good general knowledge of the goings on around school. I want the library to be the place where the students come for information. If we do not have that information, we will find out. So coming to the library just makes good sense. The trick is also to get them to stay.

Years ago, we started playing music in the library. Each day has a theme: Monday, blues; Tuesday, classical/instrumental; Wednesday, vocal; Thursday, world and Friday, Jazz. I am amazed at how the music generates discussion. This ranges from, "What is this garbage?" to "I thought I knew music until I heard Miles Davis in here". We have an extensive and eclectic music collection and everything we play can be signed out. Music is crucial to students. Many like to explore new musical areas and we can provide for most except contemporary. They know that already. However, on many occasions, we

will play cds that students have brought in from home. One student is working on a compilation of African pop songs so we can play it. As I love to discover new music as well, the students have given me some very interesting musical leads. The new musical *Fela* would be meaningless to me had not one of our Nigerian students introduced me to Fela Kuti. When we play his music, the students always comment.

In order to appeal to a large range of tastes, we have subscribed to many magazines. Some might say too many, but the magazines get a lot of action. Ranging from *Mad* (which is still pretty funny) to *The Economist*, we try to satisfy all tastes in between. Many are for curriculum use, but just as many respond to student interests. Again, students have often suggested magazines for us to order. If appropriate and not too expensive, we will try to add their request to our list as well. The most recent additions include: *The Source*, *BBC Classical Music Magazine* (with a cd each month) and *The Atlantic*. We are constantly putting magazines away, so we know they are highly used. We use fine money to purchase the less academically related magazines, so the students are basically buying themselves the more fun magazines.

Manga is a popular area that I have little patience for. A comic book fan from the 60's, I see the new trends in graphic works as a huge diverging from what my purist sensibilities will allow. However, the activity of our graphic works materials is astounding. We cannot buy enough to keep the students happy. This interest transcends gender, culture, age and ability level. The mildly autistic girl, who either goes to class or comes to the library, does nothing but read these books. In fact, it is because I heard her laughing while she read that I realized these books have potential. That was several years ago. She graduates this year and we can talk freely—as freely as she is able and I credit this to having the books in the library. We always make a point to tell her when new books have come in--although she seems to know in advance. Other students, former Goth girls, have been bringing in their Manga books for us to purchase. The graphic works section has been a huge hit for many of this year's grade nines. They have no hesitation coming into the library as they can see the collection from the door.

We do not allow eating in the library. While this is growing trend in public libraries, high school kids are still kids and are not the best at cleaning up after themselves. With the ban on eating, we still have to go around and clean up what looks like the remains of full course meals. When I tossed one student out for eating in the library, our library technician found out later from the student, that she hates eating in the cafeteria because she has few friends and eating alone there calls attention to her loneliness. I still do not want to have an open policy on food in the library, but her comment has made me wonder how many other students come to the library because they are alone. Now, when I toss, I do so more gently.

Our library is staffed by three of us: a teacher-librarian, a library technician and a library secretary. We each have different things to offer the students. Both can talk of books that I do not normally read, but the students do. One can talk to the girls about their nails or hair and the girls respond in kind. I cannot engage in this kind of discussion as it is neither safe (these days) nor interesting for me to do so. However, these students have someone with whom to connect. For some this is an important connection point and at times, the conversation moves from that to something that concerns them. Once the door is open a little, students will ease themselves inside.

The library has to be a safe house where students know that they will be listened to and the staff cares about them. I am not at all a sports fan, but I make it a point to listen to the day's sports highlights so I can carry on a conversation with students who live and breathe sports. Often I get caught not knowing what I am talking about and the kids get the chance to correct or inform me. For some, life exists for sport. One of our star football players—soon to graduate has just this year adopted me to help him with his essays. A scholarship student, he is a delight to work with and at times, we have moved from his assignments to academic counseling. He has been scouted by two schools and is having difficulty deciding. I would never suggest one over the other, but hopefully by my listening, he will be able to decide for himself.

So often the discussions move from the school assignment to matters closer to their hearts. Family problems, school problems, dating problems, personal issues—all find their way to the surface when we have the time to listen. When our daughter was in high school and was relating a particularly difficult day, I asked her what she wanted me to do. To my shock she said, "I don't expect you to do anything. I just want you to listen". That has stuck with me and so, for the most part, as the stories are told, we listen. In a school of over 2000, there are so many students who need someone to listen. In the library, if staffed properly, we have that ability.

We watch friendships develop in the library. Sometimes we play a role—especially if a student new to the school could be paired up with one of our library regulars. Most times, students gravitate towards each other and do not need us. However, we have to provide the environment where the students can gather to work or at least pretend to work. For this reason being open before and after school is essential. Often, long after the final bell has gone, the library is full of students. Daily, when it is time to close, we have to ask students to pack up and leave. There is nowhere else in the school for kids to gather—unless they are attached to a school team or club and under the supervision of a staff member.

Having a varied collection will also bring students in to the library. Despite what is said, kids love to read new and interesting books. True this cost money, but a good collection is essential. Once, years ago, a student put on a puppet show during a school

assembly. It was fantastic and I asked her where she learned puppetry. She said that she was bored one day and found a puppetry book on the library shelf and was hooked. My office is filled with origami projects ranging from lucky stars, through paper flowers to an incredible snowflake or star (I'm not sure). The origami books were very popular at the beginning of the year and many students were engaged. These books found the students and even though they are graduating this year, it was still a big deal for me to put up their work for display. Of course, these will stay in my office long after the students are gone.

A few years ago we put an aquarium in the library. It is not large and a student is looking after it during the school year and takes it home for the summer. Daily, students come in just to say hi to the fish. When another student brought us some guppies from his home tank, I overheard one student tell another, "Oh, Casper has some new friends". We did not name the fish. Her friend was not at all puzzled as she clearly knew who "Casper" was. The more things we have in the library, the more connections we can make. I've had the hardest students wax eloquently about their own fish. A surprising number of kids have aquariums at home. I wonder what would happen if I bought a parrot?

Volunteers are essential to the school library. In Ontario, students are required to earn 40 hours of volunteer work as a condition of graduation. The library is the perfect place for a grade 9 student to volunteer. Working in the library will give the student experience for when he or she is looking for a paid position in the community, but it also sells the library to the general public. These students can be ambassadors for the school library. Often students, who begin as library volunteers, stay for their entire high school years working well beyond the required 40 hours.

To access the computers in our school, students need to use a password. After the first week of school, new students have to go through me to get access to the school computers. I simply send the request to our IT department, but it gives me a chance to get to know the new students. On occasion I have taken them on a tour of the school. Many of these students are coming to our school with their own story, so the transition will take some work. One of these students told me at the end of her two years, she could not have made it through without my help. That surprised me as I did not do anything special that I was aware of. She said I was always there when she needed help. Had she not said, I would never have known. Which leads me to wonder, how many other students do we not help along the way?

Making the school library the hub of the school is difficult work. Our library is unlike any library in the movies or on television. While I could put my hair in a bun, I don't think I've ever said, "Shhhh!" to anyone. There is a great deal of noise and activity, the music is playing and the kids are able to come and go as they please. The computers are

always in use and sometimes for school activity. Students come in and ask for other students by name: "If you see Sally, tell her I'll be in the caf" assuming we know who the speaker is and who is Sally. The expectation is that we do. Sometimes we do.

Regulars who suddenly disappear from the library or students who seem to be spending an unusual amount of time in the library, we will call Guidance about. Often there is a story there too, and by acting, we were able to nip something potentially bad in the bud.

Student success is key to everything we do. Success goes far beyond academics and we see that every day. A student who is unhappy, lonely, broken, frustrated, or hungry cannot succeed in class. They need a place where they can go and think or talk to whomever they can. Sometimes it is us, but often it is each other and they need a place to do that. If we do things right, the library can be that place for all students.

Biography

Frank Loreto is a teacher-librarian at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School in Brampton Ontario. He has taught in Walkerton, Haileybury, Brantford, Rainy River and Brampton over the course of 30 years. Getting more and more tired of the politics that insinuates its way into education, he is not at all tired of the students. In fact, time has gone so quickly that he is now teaching the children of former students. That is not a bad thing.

An English teacher at heart, Loreto seems to thrive in the library environment as he finds everything interesting—except Mathematics and other number related subjects. This he makes clear to his students, so they know better than to waste their time asking him for help. In other areas though, he is looking up information on things long after the student who has made the request has gone back to class.

Loreto is proud to have brought automation to the libraries in his school board as well as pioneering CD-Rom technology and laughs at the letter he wrote to a past Director of Education wherein Loreto states that this Internet thing will have some potential and that the Director might want to come and see it. He wonders now how we ever survived without.

Loreto remembers when the school library was staffed by 3 teacher librarians, a library-technician, a library secretary and an audio-visual technician. Now, it is a teacher (no longer a department head) and in another year, a library technician. The golden days of school libraries seem to have passed. However, the need for quality school libraries is even more essential now than ever before. He is saddened that the powers-that-be do not understand that and has made it his mission to try to get them to wake up. It is a hard wall, but his head is harder.

Able to retire at anytime, Loreto plans to keep at this until it is no longer fun. There are still many things to learn and who knows, maybe the right student will come along who can make Mathematics comprehensible. Until that day...

A photo of me taken by a student in my office: Notice how the papers to my right seem poised to attack. The whole office is like that. That line of white to the left of my head is made up of confiscated dice. I never said our kids were angels!

It was a dress-down day otherwise I would have been wearing a shirt and tie.



This has not been published anywhere else, although the ideas in the section on music in the library and the use of magazines have appeared as two separate articles in *The Teaching Librarian*:

magazines: Page 11 <http://www.accessola2.com/images/infocentral/TL12.1.pdf>

Music: Page 34

http://www.accessola2.com/images/infocentral/tl14_1.pdf

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