

# Changing School Culture: The Role of the 21st Century Teacher- Librarian

Dianne Oberg  
University of Alberta

## Abstract

The integrated school library program model advocated by teacher-librarians and described in government policy and library association position papers is an innovation that has proved to be difficult to implement in North American schools. The model proposes that the primary role of the teacher-librarian is teaching in partnership with classroom teachers. However, because elements of this model challenge the traditional culture of the school, the teacher-librarian needs to work as a change agent. Changing the organizational culture of the school constitutes the key role of the 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher-librarian and requires a deep knowledge of the particular culture of the school and the complexities of the change process.

## Genesis of this Paper

This paper is an abbreviated version of an article published in *Library Trends* (Oberg, 2009), titled “Libraries in schools: Essential contexts for studying organizational change and culture.” That paper was written for a general library audience. In this version of the paper, I am writing more specifically with teacher-librarians in mind. I begin with a discussion of the unique nature of school library, the culture of the organization of which it is a part, and the integrated school library program as an innovation that has yet to be implemented in many schools. Then I present an overview of the change process to set the context for examining the roles of three key players in the implementation of the integrated school library program: the principal, the teacher, and the teacher-librarian. To conclude, I suggest implications for school library practitioners and educators and give some final thoughts about the work of changing organizational culture as a role for the 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher-librarian.

In this paper, I use the Canadian terms, “teacher-librarian” and “integrated school library program.” The term “teacher-librarian” recognizes two important aspects of the position, dual qualifications in education and librarianship and the primacy of an instructional role. The term “integrated school library program” indicates that the program, when fully implemented, is a collaborative program, integrated with the school’s curriculum, and encompassing “literacy/learning achievement, research/inquiry skills, reader interest/motivation, student/teacher use of technology, and building a positive school culture/community” (Prince Edward Island School Libraries, 2009).

## School Libraries as Special Libraries

School libraries are, in my view, “special libraries.” School libraries and special libraries both serve the interests of the organization of which they are a part, and they both serve a defined clientele. School librarians, like special librarians, often are the sole librarians in their organization and they typically report to a supervisor who is not a librarian. The organizations within which teacher-librarians or special librarians serve often hold high expectations for librarians to contribute to the success of the “enterprise,” whether that

might be the health of a patient presenting unusual symptoms, the profitability of a new corporate initiative, or the success of students on external assessments. For example, it is not unusual for teacher-librarians to be expected to work with every teacher in a school and with every class of students, and it is not unusual for the teacher-librarian to be expected to show how he or she has contributed to the successes of those teachers and students. The “enterprise” of the school is curriculum-driven teaching and learning which means that the “enterprise” of the school library is to contribute to the curriculum-related needs of the teachers and students in that school. The goal of the school library is to positively contribute to teaching and learning in the school; it also has the potential to contribute to the social goals of the school such as student engagement, inclusion of diverse learners, and relationships with the community. Because the school library serves the interests of the school of which it is a part, the teacher-librarian needs to understand the culture of the school in order to be able to work within that culture and/or to work to change that culture.

### **The Culture of the School**

The concept of *culture* refers to a group’s shared beliefs, customs, and behaviour. The culture of the school is created through the interplay of the beliefs and attitudes of those in the school and those in its environment. In the mid 1980s, several Canadian school library researchers (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Monkhouse, 1984) began to use the concepts of school culture and change as ways to understand the challenge of implementing the integrated school library program, often referred to at that time as “cooperative planning and teaching.” In one of my first articles based on these concepts, I wrote that “Teacher-librarians are involved in the process of change whether they are implementing a program for the first time, making changes to an established program, or participating in some aspects of ongoing school improvement” (Oberg, 1990, p. 9). In that article, I described the school as an organization, as a workplace, shapes and is shaped by the norms of teaching: *conservativism* (“I like schools, and I don’t see the need to change them”), *individualism* (“I learned to teach on my own, and now I teach on my own”) and *presentism* (“My financial rewards are tied to education and experience, not to effort and outcomes”). These traditional norms of teaching are very pervasive across North American schools and appear to have remained stable over many decades. This makes change in schools and school systems very difficult.

Yet, as I pointed out in the 1990 article, change does occur. In some schools, teachers have moved away from the traditional norms of privacy and self-reliance toward the norms of collegiality and experimentation (Little, 1982) that support an instructional innovation such as the integrated school library program. In some schools, integrated school library programs have been implemented successfully and their successes seem to share some common elements: the presence of a collaborative culture, the collaborative leadership style of the principal and high expectations for the students and staff (Howard, 2008).

### **The School Library Program as an Innovation**

The integrated school library program is best thought of not as a unitary innovation, but as a bundle of innovations. This becomes clearer when the elements of the integrated

school library program are compared with those of traditional classroom culture (Brown, 1988). The integrated school library program involves cooperative planning, team teaching, precisely defined goals and objectives, individualized instruction, variety in resources, maximum freedom for the learner, teacher as facilitator of independent learning, and different locations for learning. In contrast, the traditional classroom culture is characterized by isolated planning, teacher autonomy, vague goals, group instruction, reliance on textbooks, teacher control, teacher as central to the learning process, and self-contained classrooms. Any educational innovation, a new program or policy, is likely to involve changes in three dimensions—materials such as new resources or technologies; teaching approaches such as new instructional strategies, and beliefs such as the assumptions and theories underlying the innovation. These dimensions are dynamically interrelated: a change in one is likely to have an impact on the others. The integrated school library program as an innovation is multidimensional and, for most educators, constitutes a change in all three dimensions, all in a dynamic relationship with each other.

### **The Change Process**

The research related to planned change in education is extensive, going back to the 1970s (see, for example, Fullan, 1982, 1991, 1993, 1999). Discussions of the change process has been and continues to be a theme within the professional and research literature of the school library field (see, for a recent example, Hughes-Hassell and Harada's 2007 book on school reform and the role of the school library professional). Since the 1970s, some important lessons have been learned about planned change—change is a process, it is personal, and it takes time.

Change is a process, not an event; it is a journey into uncharted territory (Fullan, 1993). Each of the general stages of planned change—adoption of the innovation, implementation of the innovation, and institutionalization or continuance of the innovation—is characterized by uncertainty and risk-taking. The success or failure of each stage of the change process is influenced by many different factors: Fullan (1982) identified over 25 general factors influencing the process of planned change. One aspect of the general factor, "Existence and quality of innovations," is the clarity of the innovation. That is, relatively simple well-defined innovations, such as using a new technology in teaching, generally are easier to implement than more complex, less well-defined innovations such as the integrated school library program.

Change is personal and affects each individual in a different way. The Concerns-Based Adoption model (Hord, Rutherford, Hulling & Hall, 2006) helps to explain how individual teachers respond to the introduction of an innovation that they are expected to implement. At first, teachers are likely to have self-concerns--concerns about how it will affect them personally. Once teachers start to try the innovation, they are likely to have task concerns—concerns about how to use the innovation and use their time efficiently. Once management concerns have been addressed, teachers begin to express concerns about how the innovation is affecting their students, how they can improve its effectiveness, and eventually how they can work with others to improve and implement the innovation. Because the integrated school library program is a bundle of innovations, the teacher-librarian is likely to be working with a number of teachers who

vary in their knowledge of and experience with the different aspects of the program. For example, some teachers might be skilled at and have few concerns about team teaching while having many concerns about using a variety of resources in teaching. The Concerns-Based Adoption model offers a framework for tracking teachers' implementation efforts and for planning support for teachers. The teacher-librarian also needs to keep in mind another way in which change affects individuals: the rewards and costs of change are not the same for everyone, an idea that I explore later in this article in considering why teachers may or may not choose to work collaboratively with the teacher-librarian.

Change takes time and occurs over different time frames, for individuals and organizations. Relatively simple instructional innovations often take three to five years to implement fully (to the stage of institutionalization or continuance). Major school reforms that involve changing school culture may take up to ten years of (Fullan, 1991). Developing a collaborative work culture in a school and developing an integrated school library program require years of "doing the right things consistently and persistently" (p. 210). Because making major improvements in schools involves working and learning together with clear and attainable goals, the loss of a few key individuals (the improvement "champions") can derail or doom to failure a promising initiative. It takes years for teacher-librarians to develop a deep understanding of and commitment to the integrated school library program; they too have gone through stages of concern as they incorporated new practices into their work (e.g., using a Guided Inquiry model of instruction, teaching searching strategies for online databases, adapting programs to meet the needs of new immigrants, and so on). It should not surprise us that it takes other educators time to develop their understanding of and commitment to the integrated school library program.

The school library can and must be a venue for change because its core mandate is improving teaching and learning within the school, for all members of the school community, for teachers and administrators as well as for students. The integrated school library program is a vehicle for change, but it can be affected by changes initiated elsewhere. Sometimes, even school reforms that would appear to be supportive of the integrated school library program can be enacted in ways that are disruptive to the school library program (see, for example, Meyers, 2008). The teacher-librarian can also be involved in bringing about other changes in the school such as addressing diversity or involving families in literacy development (see Hughes-Hassell & Harada, 2007), and each of these changes can be brought about more successfully if the teacher-librarian is knowledgeable about the change process and willing to engage in working with others to bring about positive changes.

### **Key Partners in School Library Implementation**

The development of successful school library programs is a complex process influenced by many factors. For example, researchers in Ontario, Canada identified 13 factors important to the development of exemplary school libraries: school board-level policies; school board-level supports; funding models; staffing models; administrative support; demographics; principal knowledge; teacher knowledge; teacher-librarian experience; teacher-librarian skills; physical features of the library; history of the library; and

community and parent involvement (Klinger, Lee, Stephenson, & Luu, 2009). At the school level, these factors are evident in the relationships between, teachers, principals, and teacher-librarians. The collaboration and mutual support of these three are critical for the success of the school library program.

### **The Role of the Principal**

The role of the principal in relation to school libraries has been extensively discussed in the professional and research literature of the field (see Oberg, 1995). Generally, principals are more likely than classroom teachers to be supportive of the role of the teacher-librarian, to value the role of the teacher-librarian related to in-service within the school, to see the need for the specialized knowledge of the teacher-librarian. However, many principals are hampered in their support for school libraries by lack of knowledge about the management and function of school libraries (Church, 2007; Wilson, Blake & Lyders, 1993), and few recognize the instructional role of the school librarian (Kolencik, 2001).

My own research, conducted over 20 years, has focussed on the concept of principal support. Three studies in particular have enriched my understanding of this concept: a case study of a district with exemplary school library programs which examined the roles of principals, teacher-librarians, district leaders (LaRocque & Oberg, 1990); a case study of the experiences of novice teacher-librarians in schools where the program was new to them, to teachers, and to principals (Oberg & LaRocque, 1992); and an international survey on the role of principals in supporting school library programs in Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Scotland, and South Korea (Henri, Hay & Oberg, 2002). The latter study used the conceptual framework developed through the first two studies to examine the concept of principal support from the perspective of both principals and teacher-librarians.

This research demonstrated that the principal supports the school library program and the teacher-librarian in four ways:

- ◆ As a supervisor working directly with teachers
- ◆ As a model demonstrating personal commitment
- ◆ As a manager enabling the program
- ◆ As a mentor for the teacher-librarian providing visibility / importance

When asked how the teacher-librarian contributes to teaching and learning in their schools, principals in Alberta stated that the teacher-librarian does this through in-servicing staff, through cooperative planning and teaching, and through collection development (Hay, Henri & Oberg, 1998).

Teacher-librarians need the support of the principal but they also need to support the principal by working to advance school goals, to promote with others the principal's views of school goals, and to connect library program goals with school goals. Teacher-librarians need to be effective communicators, willing to enhance the principal's knowledge of the program and the teacher-librarian role, explain clearly the goals of the school library program, and to explain clearly their own needs for professional development.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Research on the role of the teacher in relation to school libraries has shown that teachers' use of libraries is influenced by their experiences in high school and in university, their perception of their own library knowledge, the encouragement of their principals, and the nature of curriculum requirements. My research with teachers in Alberta (Oberg, 1993) indicated that teachers who received library-related experience and instruction in their teacher education were more likely to share books with their students, to provide library instruction to their students, and to collaborate with library staff. It appeared that experiences in teacher education compensated for lack of library experiences prior to entering university if those experiences included receiving instruction related to how to teach information skills and strategies. Unfortunately, library-related instruction is not a core element of many teacher education programs.

The encouragement of principals and the nature of curriculum requirements are supporting factors for teachers using libraries in their teaching, but these factors are not sufficient in many cases to influence teachers to collaborate with the teacher-librarian. The culture of the school, as played out in classroom teaching, is often a more potent factor. In schools where the autonomy of teachers is highly valued, this autonomy may be used to reject innovations such as the integrated school library program and to resist collaboration with the teacher-librarian, even when resource-based learning and collaboration is supported by a governmental school reform policy (Kelsey, 2004).

The benefits of collaboration have been well-established in research and practice. However, there are very real costs to involvement in collaboration. These costs may constitute subtle but crucial barriers to involvement for teachers (Oberg, 1990). The cost of participation in collaboration to teachers may be understood in terms of four elements--time, effort, lifestyle, and self-esteem. Learning how to collaborate takes considerable time and effort, especially in the initial stages. For many teachers, collaboration will demand alterations in their basic norms of teaching, and most people look at changes in their current way of operating with some degree of trepidation. This lifestyle cost is closely related to self-esteem cost. Teachers may resist opening their teaching to another who may not think highly of their approach. The teacher also may feel that, in collaborative activities, the teacher-librarian will be cast as the expert in the situation and the teacher will be cast in an inferior role.

Participation costs for teachers are affected by the culture of the school. Where the cultural values of the school emphasize autonomy, it will be more difficult for both teachers and teacher-librarians to change their practices of teaching and to learn the new skills needed for collaboration. For most teachers, the benefits of collaboration—in theory—are not in question. It is the perceived cost that is critical in determining whether or not teachers choose to enter into collaboration with the teacher-librarian. On the other hand, the cost of not collaborating can be high, as in the case when the principal expects teachers to engage in collaboration and monitors closely such engagement (see, for example, Oberg, 1999).

### **The Role of the Teacher-Librarian**

The role of the teacher-librarian is often defined in terms of four roles: teacher; instructional partner; information specialist; and program administrator. With the exception of the latter role, the extent to which teacher-librarians can enact their roles is

largely dependent on the culture of the school which often is most evident in the perceptions of principals and teachers in relation to the role of the teacher-librarians.

Teachers who believe that their students' learning success is largely dependent on the work done by teachers in the classroom are less likely to welcome collaboration with others, including the teacher-librarian, than teachers who believe that their students' learning success is dependent on the work of the whole school. Teaching and learning are the "core business" of the school so it is not surprising to learn that one of the two features that distinguished exemplary school libraries in the 2009 Ontario study (Klinger et al.) was that "teacher-librarians maximized teaching time" (p. 18). The other feature was the active change agent role of the teacher-librarians who "continually strove to enhance library programs and to modify existing contexts" (p. 18).

The Canadian school library program model emphasizes the role of the teacher-librarian as teacher and as instructional partner. However, there is considerable research that suggests that teacher-librarians have not always been quick to take on those areas of responsibility. One challenge for all teacher-librarians is to recognize that their teaching experience is both a help and a hindrance to them. Teacher-librarians bring knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum that is invaluable to them as teachers and instructional partners, but they also bring the norms of teaching. Where the norms of their teaching experience have emphasized privacy and self-reliance, it is particularly difficult for teacher-librarians to initiate planning and teaching with others (Oberg & LaRocque, 1992). Other researchers have also observed this phenomenon: Kelsey (2004) found that, even when the work of the teacher-librarian was legitimized by the state curriculum implementation policy, teacher-librarians felt that they had to wait for opportune moments to offer services to or work with teachers, rather than being the initiators of instructional partnering activities with teachers.

### **Implications**

The key concepts of organizational culture and change have important implications for teacher-librarians and for school library educators.

For teacher-librarians: The integrated school library program is a complex educational innovation with many dimensions. Teacher-librarians who are knowledgeable about school culture and the change process will be more able to set reasonable and attainable goals for themselves and for the school library program, and they will be patient and understanding of the evolution of the school library program. Teacher-librarians who are knowledgeable about the roles and perceptions of principals and teachers will take responsibility for initiating collaboration with teachers and seeking principal support for such initiatives. Through reflection, observation, and conversation, teacher-librarians need to gain an understanding of the costs, real and perceived, involved in collaboration. This will help teacher-librarians to address those costs and to set realistic goals for collaborative work with teachers and principals.

For school library educators: The likelihood that teacher-librarians will actively engage in collaboration is increased when teacher-librarians are well-qualified and well-prepared for their positions. School library education, whether through library schools or colleges of education, should prepare information specialists who are also prepared to act as school leaders and as change agents and catalysts for school improvement. The

educational research literature emphasizes the importance of school culture as a factor in instructional innovations. The concepts of culture and change need to be addressed thoroughly in school library education (Mardis, 2007). Because teacher-librarians often need to help teachers and administrators understand the integrated school library program, school library education programs should prepare their graduates to positively present their key instructional role.

### Final Thoughts

Two underlying ideas need to be borne in mind as we wrestle with the concepts of culture and change in relation to the integrated school library program: moral purpose (Fullan, 1999) and meaning (Oberg, 1992). The moral purpose of the integrated school library program is making a difference in the lives of young people. However, moral purpose is not so easy to maintain in complex times. Fullan reminds us that change usually benefits some more than others and that the change literature only rarely has addressed questions of power and equity. Can the integrated school library program contribute to making a difference to all of the young people in the school, or only to the college-bound or the native speakers of English?

Implementing the integrated school library program involves changing the meaning of the school library in the minds of its users—teachers and students—but also in the minds of the teacher-librarian and other school leaders. The integrated school library program is about improving teaching and learning for all members of the school's community—the facility, the collection, the technology, and the staff are means to that end. The challenge for the teacher-librarian is to be an agent and catalyst for change within the whole school as well as within the school library.

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### Author Note

Dianne Oberg is a professor in teacher-librarianship in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta in Canada. She is currently Chair of the Department of Elementary Education and Faculty Advisor for the online MEd program in teacher-librarianship. Before coming to the University, Dianne worked as a classroom teacher and teacher-librarian in the public school system. Her research focuses on teacher-librarianship education and on the implementation and evaluation of school library programs. She has conducted research on the role of principals, teachers, and teacher-librarians in implementing the integrated school library program. Dianne is the editor of the international refereed journal, *School Libraries Worldwide*, and an active member of school library associations at local, national, and international levels.

Dianne Oberg, PhD  
 Professor and Chair  
 Department of Elementary Education, 551 Education South  
 University of Alberta  
 Edmonton, AB T6G 2G5 CANADA  
 Phone 1-780-492-5416  
 Fax 1-780-492-7622  
 Email doberg@ualberta.ca