

**Coming Together for Learning:
A Journey of Transformation and Success**

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2010**

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the following narrative research is to communicate the events and experiences that led to the changing role of the teacher-librarians of the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board (TBCDSB). In simple terms, I will retell the story of transformation and success that has created renewed interest and excitement in our school libraries. Throughout this paper, this journey will be referred to as the Library Project. Three significant events contributed to this transformation and they are library automation, collection development and a modification to the teaching assignment of teacher-librarians. The participants of this project include eleven teacher-librarians and three instructional leaders representing fifteen schools in the K-6 elementary panel. For the purpose of this paper, the time period in question takes place in the school years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010. This is the account of how the teacher-librarians of the TBCDSB came together for learning.

RATIONALE

Prior to the onset of the Library Project, I would describe the physical and human conditions of the libraries of the TBCDSB to be no different than any others around the country that had been neglected for decades. This neglect took the form of aging technology and collections, as well as insufficient staffing. Although there were no Canadian studies at the time of Ken Haycock's writing (2003), he brought a Canadian perspective to the problem of declined spending in Canadian school libraries with the warning that the future of our students was in jeopardy and we were on the verge of a crisis. His report offered many recommendations for the funding of school library collections, staffing and administration. In one of his most influential statements Haycock (2003) recommends:

That Ministries of Education and school boards recognize the key elements of effective school libraries and their effect on achievement; clear program and role definition; collaboration with colleagues; flexible scheduling; emphasis on literacy and information problem solving; and required training. (P.39)

Over a decade ago, Keith Curry Lance became recognized for his landmark studies in the United States that linked effective school library programs with student achievement. Known as Colorado I & II, Alaska, Pennsylvania and Illinois, (Lance & Loertscher, 2001) these studies proved that "there is growing evidence that to cut LMC funding and effectiveness is to strike a blow at progress currently measured by academic achievement!" (Introduction v). These findings were not statistically verified by Canadian studies until April 2006 when the Ontario Library Association partnered with Queen's University to collect empirical data for their first study, followed by the second study in 2009. Data collected from EQAO testing was considered over a five-year period in the study done by the Ontario Library Association (2006) and the findings indicate

“there has been a steady decline in the percentage of students who reported that they like to read. At the same time, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of elementary schools with teacher-librarians.” (p. 5). It would be accurate to assume that the teacher-librarian greatly influences the students’ reading interests within the entire school community.

The Ontario Library Association (2006) made the following recommendations to the Ontario government as follows:

1. Immediately update the education funding formula salary benchmarks, so that funding for school libraries can be spent on school libraries; and
2. Develop policy to ensure all Ontario students, regardless of the size of the schools they attend, or their geographic location have the access to well-stocked and professionally staffed libraries. (p. 6)

It would appear that the evidence and recommendations from both studies from Queen’s University were given serious consideration by the Ministry when it was demonstrated that student achievement was at stake. The climax of this story occurred in 2008 when the Ontario Ministry of Education announced dedicated funding for library staffing and library books for all publicly funded schools in Ontario. It was determined by the TBCDSB Trustees to channel these funds toward the improvement of school libraries with three solid initiatives. The first initiative was to implement library automation, followed by improving and updating library collections and lastly, incorporating professional development and training for the teacher-librarians.

Listed below are five themes that have been identified resulting from this research.

- 1) Recognizing the Need for Change
- 2) Creating a Teacher-Librarian Professional Learning Community
- 3) Transforming School Library Programming
- 4) Reflection and Implications for Practice
- 5) Moving Forward by Embracing the Vision

These five themes will become the steps that will describe the transformation that occurred in the Library Project. To appreciate the incredible success story that the teacher-librarians of the TBCDSB have experienced as they came together for learning, I invite you to relive their journey by taking the first step.

STEP # 1 - RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Prior to 2009, teacher-librarians employed with our board worked in libraries with outdated resources, inadequate card catalogue systems and were providing planning and preparation time for classroom teachers. This meant that in the 1/2 time teaching assignments, there was only enough time for students from K to grade three to visit the library. We realize how this became a serious issue of access because the junior students were excluded and received no level of service from the teacher-librarian. According to the UNESCO School Library Manifesto (1999), “School Library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender...or school status”. Although teacher-librarians were still employed in our

schools, they were not being utilized to their full potential and the benefits that a qualified teacher-librarian could provide within a school were unknown. Consequently, the value of such a position was definitely underestimated and misunderstood. In Ken Haycock's article, (as cited in Asselin, Branch & Oberg, 2003) this misconception is described with extreme accuracy:

Although there are more than forty years of research to support the notion that teacher-librarians affect student achievement, this information is almost unknown outside the school library community, and even then it is known only by those who have professional qualifications, belong to professional associations and read professional literature. (p. 65)

As the Library Project began to develop, a critical decision was made for all teacher-librarians to become members of the Ontario School Library Association under the umbrella of the Ontario Library Association. This was significant as it brought cohesiveness to our group and a sense of belonging when the teacher-librarians came together for learning in the form of a professional learning community.

STEP #2 - CREATING A T-L PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Pursuing Graduate Studies in Teacher-Librarianship has provided me with a wealth of knowledge on the topic of collaboration, inquiry and research and teacher-librarianship, but having the knowledge without advocating and sharing the knowledge is not enough to move ahead. For change to occur, I needed to demonstrate leadership and share this knowledge with my colleagues and administration. I organized a resource kit that I believed contained the best of my resources from my graduate studies to date. The content of this kit includes American and Canadian research studies that demonstrate the value of quality school library programming and other pertinent reference materials. This information was enlightening to the decision makers and made a strong defense for the investment of teacher-librarians and school libraries. The result of this has been that I have become instrumental in planning and facilitating a plan for change.

As the 2009 school year came to an end, a new beginning became reality with the announcement that the teacher-librarians would be taking part in their own professional learning community starting in September 2009. Along with that, I would be part of the leadership team for developing the content and structure. What made the circumstances of this announcement more exciting was that the T/L's would no longer be required to deliver planning and preparation time as part of their teaching assignments. This certainly was the best news we had ever heard as teacher-librarians!

In the PLC strategic plan, the TBCDSB mandated that the structure follow the model that was developed by the OSLA entitled *School library program: Teacher-librarian + classroom teacher = student achievement* (2005). In order to run the PLC effectively, a reference book was required. The text that was chosen upon my recommendation is entitled *Toward a 21st Century School Media Program* (2007). This

text provides the information that is essential for developing the desired PLC program as the content coincides with the mandated structure. It was decided that the leadership team would take one planning day per month for preparation and another day for delivery, at which time all teacher-librarians would be in attendance along with any special guests and speakers. Literacy Resource Teachers, Information Technology experts and book company representatives would be invited to share their expertise in the PLC. Now that we had the structure and resources in place, the only issue remaining was to bring everyone together with a manner of passion, pride and a common purpose. As previously noted, the TBCDSB purchased a group membership for the Ontario Library Association. In doing so, members receive the *Teaching Librarian* magazine to keep them informed and in touch with the issues that concern teacher-librarians and libraries. In keeping aligned with our faith, we have adopted St. Jerome's Prayer of Libraries and Librarians to begin each of our PLC meetings. (see appendix A) This prayer has seriously affected our thoughts and feelings regarding the impact that books and libraries has had on humanity through the passage of time.

STEP #3 - TRANSFORMING OUR SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAMMING

Collaboration

The collaborative role of the teacher-librarian is key and is the most important component of the position. Collaboration directly influences the climate of the entire school community as relationships are built and partnerships are developed between students, parents, teachers and administrators.

To ensure that teachers and teacher-librarians are able to successfully collaborate, there must be structured time set aside for this to take place. Doiron & Asselin (2005) state that:

Teachers and teacher-librarians may use a curriculum development process called Collaborative Program Planning and Teaching. This is an excellent concept for establishing a collaborative relationship but for this to happen, the teacher-librarian needs to be available to the teacher on the teacher's planning time.

This sentiment is further validated when Haycock (as cited in Asselin, Branch & Oberg, 2003) states:

Collaboration of this type depends on the availability of both the teacher-librarian and the teacher to plan and work together. It thus cannot be the role of the teacher-librarian to provide the teacher's preparation time or the critical element affecting student achievement is lost. (p. 66)

Currently within the Library Project, teacher-librarians no longer provide preparation and planning time. Timetabling has been developed to include formal and informal collaboration and a combination of fixed and flexible scheduling. We are starting with a fixed schedule for primary students to ensure that they continue to appreciate the experience of how important that reading for enjoyment can be. The scheduling for junior grades is moving towards flexible to allow additional collaborative efforts between teachers and teacher-librarians. This will enable them to take on larger projects with

classroom teachers that require more sustained time in the library for inquiry and research and use of the computer lab.

Literacy

There have been a number of initiatives brought forward during The Library Project. There have been three focus areas that have been developed in the literacy category which are in training, resources and reading programs. Throughout the PLCs, traditional literacy training has played an important role in our learning. The Literacy Resource Teachers from our board have given informative presentations on balanced literacy, big ideas for critical pathways and the use of graphic organizers that support classroom teachers in their programming. At every PLC either a read aloud or a book talk is done as these two techniques are so much a part of what teacher-librarians do on a daily basis in their libraries. This is how we create magic and light fires for our students as they develop their own reading habits. All T/L's are encouraged to take part at staff meetings by engaging in read alouds and book talks. We know that reading reflects on how well a student will perform in all content areas so it is imperative that we engage all students in reading for enjoyment. In doing so, it is of utmost importance that students be able to find "just the right book". For this to happen, the library must be organized in a way that encourages easy accessibility that in turn will motivate all levels of readers to find what they need and want. Graphic novels have become part of every library for this reason and these books are always in demand.

A major advancement in this journey took place in collection development. A team was assembled to research picture book titles that were relevant to topics such as social justice, environmental citizenship and in our case "Catholic Virtues in Action". Also included were books that were effective for teaching the different elements of reading and writing strategies. Every elementary school now has these books in their libraries. It has been a great support to the teachers and teacher-librarians as they work through their TLCPs and share these picture books with their students. By establishing a list of core picture books in every library as teacher literacy resources, continuity among schools has been achieved.

New to many schools this year is that they are participating in the Ontario Library Association's "Forest of Reading". This reading program promotes Canadian authors and illustrators, which is something that our students need exposure to. In the K-6 elementary panel, the first program is Blue Spruce for grades K-2, followed by Silver Birch Express for grades 3-4 and Silver Birch for grades 5-6. There are ten picture books in Blue Spruce; five titles each of fiction and non-fiction in Silver Birch Express and ten each of fiction and non-fiction in Silver Birch. A workshop was held on how to run a successful Forest of Reading program. It was the expectation during our project that teacher-librarians order the Forest books to build their library collections while participating in the reading program. The students have enjoyed completing activity books and going to the OLA website for web-based activities. Ways to enjoy the Forest

books are endless and the best part is that students get to vote for their favorite book. The winning books are announced at a spectacular harbour front celebration in Toronto to conclude the Forest of Reading Program.

Information Literacy

Information literacy is a topic that we will explore next year as we continue with the teacher librarian PLC. There is an urgent need to focus on Information Literacy in our fast paced information world. Asselin et al (2003) state, “The major learning outcome for the school library program is to develop students who are information literate” (p. 4). In order to appreciate the benefits of teaching Information Literacy, it is essential to provide the following definition according to Asselin et al (2003).

An information literate citizen:

- Works independently and collaboratively to solve problems
- Analyses information critically in all its formats and in all media contexts
- Applies information strategically to solve personal and social problems
- Makes decisions based on accurate and current information
- Uses information and communication technologies
- Respects information sources and diverse perspectives
- Honours intellectual property and privacy rights
- Appreciates the aesthetic qualities of various creative and scientific expressions
- Communicates effectively and expressively using a variety of information and media formats. (p. 5)

It is quite evident that to become information literate, students are required to develop the skills to be problem solvers. Being information literate prepares students in their journey as life-long learners. The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1995) states “Information literacy is the key to helping students use learning throughout their lives as a way to solve problems, act ethically, plan for the future and prepare for change” (p. 4).

The Inquiry and Research Process allows students to construct their own personal understanding of the world in which they live. As Donham et al (2001) state: “Inquiry takes students out of the pure format of the textbook and rote memorization into the process of learning from a variety of sources” (p. 1). The inquiry process is powerful in the fact that it gives students ownership of their learning and freedom to ask their own questions. The motivation to learn is validated when students find the answers to their own questions. Donham et al (2001) stress this fact when stating that students need to “go beyond finding facts to create their own understanding at a deeper level” (p. 10). Inquiry and research is based on the constructivist theory of learning. It activates higher order thinking skills as students continuously construct and reconstruct new information based on previous knowledge. This is the area in which students lack the ability and skill. “[This] process of construction is an active ongoing process of learning that continues throughout life” (Donham et al p. 12). It is paramount that teacher/librarians advance to new levels to improve the learning experience of students. According to

Koehlin & Zwaan (2002) “[Students] need skills and strategies to help them explore and determine their information needs, access appropriate data, process the data that they have acquired and communicate their new understanding to others” (p. 1). It is important that students be taught these skills in elementary school as Spalding (2006, October 23) reports that “elementary schools have just been decimated by budget cuts” and a secondary school teacher complained, “students come to [her] without basic research skills” (A4). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) recognizes the importance of inquiry and research skills when they give acknowledgment to the Ontario School Library Association’s four-stage inquiry model.

The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) studied a wide range of literature and research in the fields of information and science and information studies and identified the following four stages as being common to all models of inquiry and research. **Stage 1**- Preparing for research; **Stage 2** – Accessing Resources; **Stage 3** – Processing Information and **Stage 4** – Transferring Learning. (p. 36)

The inquiry process is critical to student success and lifelong-learning. The Ontario School Library Association (1999) established that:

Students need the fundamental skills and knowledge of inquiry and research to be information literate. Information literacy is a prerequisite for success in all subjects of the curriculum, for preparation for work and further education and for lifelong learning. (p. 16)

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) agrees when they affirm that “Many educators have found that student learning improves when schools adopt a consistent model of inquiry and research across all grades and subjects” (p. 36). The teacher-librarian plays an important role in adopting the model of inquiry and research. Not only does this model benefit students, it provides the teacher-librarian with a tool to ensure program accountability. Farquharson (2005) believes “it inspires library media teachers to pursue excellence by utilizing research and research technologies to improve their own library program” (p.39). Incorporating action research into the library program provides the teacher-librarian with a method of reflection and evaluation to maintain methods of best practice. Inquiry and research is vital to library programming because it is so closely related to collaboration with classroom teachers. It is usually in this capacity that brings the two together.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2006) recognizes the importance of information literacy and the connection to teacher librarians when they state in their Language document that:

The school library program plays a key role in the development of information literacy and research skills. In collaboration with classroom or content-area teachers, teacher librarians develop, teach, and provide students with authentic information and research tasks that foster learning. (p. 30)

In order to support the teacher-librarians in teaching information literacy and the inquiry process to students, our board has purchased a resource entitled *Imagine the Learning*:

Elementary Research Success @ Your Library (2006). This resource won the IASL-Link Publication Award for 2007 from the International Association of School Librarianship. We are looking forward to using this resource in our PLC when the focus of the topic becomes information literacy.

Information and Communication Technologies

Information and communication technologies has become an area of great interest and advancement this past year as we have progressed through the library project. We have experienced progress in software, data base usage, and Web 2.0 tools but the greatest impact has been the implementation of library automation in all schools. In keeping with the 21st Century, we have enjoyed state of the art computer labs with capabilities for an entire class to be connected to high speed Internet for the past several years. In contrast to that, our libraries were managed with obsolete card catalogue systems. It just made perfect sense that if we were going to move forward with our library services, it was imperative to acquire an automated system.

L4U Kelowna Software was chosen as the automation system for our board. In the first phase, which took place in 2008-2009 all training for teacher-librarians on the L4U software was fulfilled followed by book processing. Some library collections were easily converted electronically but the majority required manual conversion, which meant that every book needed to be processed individually. A library technician was hired to assist with this task and this still is ongoing. The next phase (2009-2010) saw the continuation of processing with the addition of moving into circulation. The amazing part for students is they are now able to search online for books that are located in their school library at any one of the computers within the school network. This certainly represents progress as it is bringing students and books together in new meaningful ways using technology.

Experts from our IT department have conducted workshops on assistive technology and the use of Ministry funded resources including Knowledge Ontario. We have been exposed to Learn 360, which is a database where educational videos can be searched then downloaded. This has opened a whole new world for the teacher-librarians, as they can be more resourceful in their schools by sharing this information with their teachers. We have explored WEB 2.0 tools such as Wikis, Blogs and Podcasts and are in the preliminary stages of developing our own Wiki. The TBCDSB is in the process of developing a plan for the use of information and communication technology as we move into the 21st Century with so many technological advances and devices. The inclusion of Smart boards, iphones, ipods, and ipads will be given serious consideration as we search for ways to keep our students engaged in learning. The students of this generation have been born into a digital world and have not experienced their world without it. As educators, we need to face the challenge of integrating that world into their world at school. Our library project has initiated this challenge. The TBCDSB will be taking this into the future with the development of policies and curriculum to ensure that

our students learn in a safe, engaging, educational environment in this age of technological advancement.

STEP #4 - REFLECTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

We have experienced great success in our Library Project over the past two years. In looking back, we have become reflective practitioners analyzing our steps to find out if the changes have made a difference for teacher-librarianship. Without a doubt, the libraries, teacher-librarians and all who have been involved with this project have benefited. Library automation in itself was an important step forward, but it also had other surprising benefits for the teacher-librarians. Collections were weeded and along with that, library spaces received face-lifts as shelves were rearranged to make them more functional. In general, the libraries began to look alive and inviting. They became spaces where students and staff wanted to spend more time. Ultimately this will have a great impact on student achievement and learning.

This journey of transformation is not only seen in the physical space, as it has affected the hearts and minds of all who visit the library and most of all, the teacher-librarians. Through the PLC our positions have been validated and we have built a strong professional network as we collaborated with each other and with other professionals within our schools and board. No longer are the teacher-librarians living unsupported on their own separate islands. We all have moved on to the continent, and the continent is our PLC. This is what I call our “coming together for learning” - for our learning and our students’ learning.

STEP #5 - MOVING FORWARD BY EMBRACING THE VISION

It has been demonstrated throughout this paper that the Library Project of the TBCDSB has truly been a journey of transformation and success. Our journey is not over as there is still much to accomplish with the vision of the new library document that was launched this year at the OLA Super Conference. It is evident though, that this project has already fulfilled much of this vision by converting library spaces, staffing and programming. We are focused, as this project will continue in the 2010-2011 school year and we centre our attention on information literacy. This will take us to the next stage in the vision that will transform our library spaces into a “learning commons”.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that you have been able to relive the experiences of how the teacher-librarians of the TBCDSB came together for learning and transformed their libraries and roles for the benefit of student achievement. The success of this project would not have been possible without the support from administrators, superintendents, trustees and the director of the TBCDSB. When Dr. Klinger (2009) and his research team were evaluating school libraries in Ontario, they stated that none of the libraries were given a level 4. “What differentiates Level 4 programs from Level 3 is that they have systematic administrative support at the school, school board, and provincial levels, both in funding and policy”. (p.28) On the basis of that rubric, I would evaluate our Library Project as a

level 4. What has been accomplished here at the TBCDSB, when all parties have come together for a common goal is summed up profoundly by Haycock (as cited in Asselin, Branch & Oberg, 2003) when he states that:

School libraries, with qualified teacher-librarians, which operate in partnership with the province, the district, administrators and teachers, ... make a difference to student achievement - and that is the bottom line.
(p. 72)

Appendix A

St. Jerome's Prayer for Libraries and Librarians

Blessed Jerome, patron of libraries, pray that our library may prosper as it serves God through the written word.

Pray that the materials contained therein bring our readers closer to God and to one another in God.

That it be protected from theft and damage and disaster.

That all souls be welcomed and respected.

That it never lose its focus as an instrument for the spread of God's Word.

Blessed Jerome, patron of librarians, pray for those who work with books for God, that their labour be always a suitable offering to God through service to man.

That their work be pursued with diligence and love, and that they be guided in right decisions and use of resources.

Blessed Jerome, pray especially for our readers, that they be inspired in the knowledge and love of God through the materials prepared by librarians and provided by libraries. Remind all who work with libraries and all who use them that the highest end of all learning is in the love of God and their neighbours.

Gracious Lord in heaven, hear our prayers and the intercessions of our patron St. Jerome.

Grant that all who work in and for your libraries be inspired by the skill, scholarship, dedication, and tireless love of God shown forth by our blessed patron.

Accept your people of the book as humble servants and their libraries as agencies of your purpose.

Let them be found worthy to serve you always.

Amen

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