

Teacher-Librarians are Collaborative Inquiry Lead Teachers in the Simcoe County District School Board

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For the past five years our teacher-librarians have trained alongside the instructional coaches as a way to build capacity. It's a great model as our Teacher-Librarians are often experienced teachers and so they share their expertise with colleagues as they co-teach. In schools where there are coaches many of the Teacher-Librarians have volunteered to be the part-time coach. In other schools the Teacher-Librarian co-teaches with the designated coach. Our 87 elementary schools all staff a Teacher-Librarian. Whether or not the Teacher-Librarian provides prep time to others is determined by the school's population: small schools have a .67 Teacher-Librarian, mid-size schools have a .8 Teacher-Librarian and schools with more than 20 classrooms (approximately 450+ students) have a full time Teacher-Librarian position.

The Teacher-Librarian role is a highly sought after teaching position in our district. We are included in the school board's literacy plans and are given release time to work with the literacy consultant a few times a year. Teacher-Librarians are seen as effective lead teachers in our schools.

This year our literacy consultant and the Principal of program decided to frame our professional development around collaborative inquiry. We were asked to delve into the new social studies curriculum and bring another colleague along in our learning. We were asked to think about how inquiry might look in our schools and how we could support teachers as they learn the new inquiry approach. We were asked to start small and choose one class to work with and to try out some ideas.

Many of us took up the challenge to alter our teaching of social studies because this was an invite to teach collaboratively and support colleagues as they learned to adapt their teaching style to inquiry-based strategies. This matches the Teacher-Librarian role as depicted in our guiding document, *Together for Learning* (2010).

I decided to collect and summarize what we learned as a district around the teaching of inquiry so we could plan our next steps in the implementation. I also recognized this as an opportunity to highlight the great leadership and co-teaching that happens daily in our schools by teacher-librarians.

I visited the district meetings and encouraged the teacher-librarians to share what they had tried with their colleagues. They volunteered to answer the following questions on a google drive form.

What kind of inquiry projects did you try?

The inquiry projects attempted this year spanned all grades JK-8, mostly in the area of social studies. Some of the activities were in other content areas such as science, health and English. Some projects were mini-lessons around developing inquiry skills, others were 3 co-teaching periods and some worked weekly with their colleagues and students for an entire semester. A few key resources were repeatedly mentioned that guided their trials and are included in the references section.

I for example, focussed on how I might help kindergarten teachers assess and track all the great questions their students have by using a discovery table in the library. This was based on ideas I learned from the professional resource, *A place for wonder reading and writing nonfiction in the primary grades* by Heard and McDonough (2009).

What did you as a teacher(s) learn about inquiry?

The most common answer to this question was that students have difficulty developing higher ordered questions, especially if they have little background knowledge. This is a problem when we are working on guided inquiry tasks in the content areas as we are directing students to a specific subject/topic. Inquiry questions need to be created after the students have had an opportunity to learn the concepts.

Teachers also noticed that student engagement increased when the tasks were authentic and meaningful to the students. "You mean we get to ask our own questions and answer it? This is so Cool!" We learned that it is important to provide choice and to accept a broad range of topics from students as they work on their inquiry skills.

Another observation made was that students need to be supported through every stage of the inquiry process. "It is not an independent project." Assessing where the students are and then planning mini-lessons to support the students (much like guiding writing in a classroom) is a great way to provide structure for the students. This also supports teachers if they are feeling apprehensive about the student-led nature of inquiry because it provides a framework to the learning.

I have learned that inquiry looks differently in each grade and with each assignment because of its student-led nature. I learned that approaching teachers to work on guided inquiry tasks around a big idea in the curriculum is less threatening than starting with a full open ended inquiry idea. Kindergarten students are actively questioning about the world around them all the time and I now know that I can assist the classroom teacher. I can help assess the quality of their questions and find resources to answer their questions. I also discovered that we don't have to find the answer to all of the students' wonderings.

What did the students learn?

Many students were more engaged and developed better quality questions after their initial attempts. Some of my students had to get over the fear that I would want them to answer all of

their brainstormed questions. This was echoed by my colleagues when they worked with their students in their schools.

One of my students said, "I can't find a website that answers my question" which I happily replied that's because you came up with an original question and you will need to use a variety of resources and your inference skills as a reader to fully answer your great question.

Students also learned that it takes a lot of thinking time and organizational skills to answer their questions. The students liked the sense of ownership and becoming the "expert in an area."

What would you do differently?

By and far the greatest comment was that we need to spend more time co-teaching for more success. In particular teacher-librarians said they would book larger blocks of time with their teachers. Others felt that they needed to reorganize their students' collection methods into notebooks from loose papers to minimize the loss of work.

Many mentioned the need to "front load" the inquiry lessons with more background information to ensure the students were knowledgeable about the concepts. Particularly in the social studies curriculum many students lack the general understanding of the perspectives and issues.

Once students had enough scaffolding, I found it useful to create a lesson about questioning to enable them to ask better questions. We used a q-chart grid with students to help them to practice the art of questioning. Some students needed explicit instructions about how to use the q-chart. Allowing as much time as possible to think of their questions and then conferencing with students about their selection was a valuable way to assess when the students were ready to move on to the next stage of inquiry.

We also felt it was important to plan mini-lessons to explicitly teach:

- how to take relevant jot notes from a variety of media
- how to find reliable resources, and
- how to cite resources appropriately

The teacher-librarian's role is invaluable at this stage of the inquiry process.

One colleague stated that she would take more time early in the process to help the classroom teacher understand the importance of choice for her students when working in the inquiry framework.

What additional resources do you need to improve your teaching/learning?

Access to more readable texts whether they are print books or digital materials came out loud and clear when I asked my colleagues this question. Some of this could be alleviated if more teachers were fluent with assistive technology devices. I discovered that I preferred the online encyclopedia that reads to students such as Britannica. It does not have a lot of Canadian content so simple programs such as WordQ were helpful when my students needed to read

online websites. Improving our collections to increase the accessibility of the texts is important to allow students to find their answers and minimize frustration. I purchased and displayed more non-fiction texts, at a primary reading level, that were entitled as questions. I hope this display will encourage questioning in the library even when students are browsing at book exchange times.

We also learned that we need more visual materials especially in video format. Presently there is not enough quality Canadian content in the Learn 360 platform to address our curriculum needs in the social studies area.

Access to computers in the library is essential for successful student-led inquiry processes. Students will ask questions that require a variety of resources and the use of assistive technology tools is necessary for success for many of our students.

Being able to have the time during the day to co-plan and reflect back on those lessons would be beneficial. Teacher-Librarians would also like more professional learning sessions to further develop our expertise in the inquiry-based method, especially in the areas of assessment.

How did you record the process?

Many inquiry lessons used learning goals and success criteria to support all learners.

Most teacher-librarians used written or photographic records to track student learning. These anecdotal comments were shared with the classroom teacher.

Many stated that they had the students reflect back on their work in inquiry logs or research portfolios or by displaying their wonderings on a wonder wall in the library.

The inquiry logs contained q-charts, research templates, graphic organizers checklists and self-assessment prompts.

Student-Teacher conferencing was the most common way of assessing student growth along the inquiry process.

Conclusion

Support from the Teacher-Librarian is essential for the successful implementation of the inquiry approach to teaching, especially in the area of social studies. The classroom teacher needs ongoing support to adapt to the new curriculum teaching style and a teacher-librarian is the in-house consultant that is available to help. The teacher-librarian can learn along with the students and classroom teachers when he/she co-plans, co-teaches and co-assesses. We are fortunate in our school district that our teacher-librarians are seen as teachers first and were asked to take the lead in teaching teachers. We have learned a great deal about how the teaching of inquiry skills require discrete mini-lessons and that there's a need for more accessible texts to ensure student success. As always, we have learned that there is still a lot

more to learn about the effective teaching of inquiry skills. We look forward to continuing our learning with our colleagues in a collaborative model as we support students in their learning.

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