Collaborative Professionalism: Participatory Learning within the Ontario Library Association (OLA) By-Law 2 Consultation Committee

By Kasey Mallen Whalley, MI(LIS)

Introduction

During the 2019 annual general meeting (AGM) at the Ontario Library Association's (OLA) Super Conference, a motion was put forth to change the language in the OLA By-Law 2, which would eliminate the title of Teacher-Librarian from the by-laws regulating the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA). It was one of the most highly attended and highly discussed AGMs. The motion was referred with a condition to involve all stakeholders and be critically reviewed by a consultation committee. This committee would present their recommendations to be voted on by the broader OSLA community. The entire process brought to light different tensions, practices, and ideologies that have flowed through the Ontario school library industry and have impacted our work in numerous ways. As a member of the By-Law 2 Committee, I had a front row seat to a participatory learning experience that facilitated discussion and problem-solving regarding some of the tensions raised at the AGM. By working together, the committee dedicated significant time and consideration that was needed to present a reflective, transparent, and inclusive recommendation for our broader community. Examining the committee's work with insights from the wider library industry, this paper hopes to illuminate five key areas that required the committee's consideration: the challenge, framework, process, result, and path forward for recommendations regarding the OLA's By-Law 2. Exploring these areas in the context of the committee's work and broader literature can help school library professionals better understand the participatory learning and collaborative work that was done and apply this to actively create more inclusive, participatory, and collaborative workspaces in their own professional lives.

The Challenge: Addressing the Call for Change

The September, 2019 edition of *The Teaching Librarian* published a beautiful infographic of Ontario elementary school staffing models (People for Education, 2019, pp. 22-23). One thing becomes incontestable and clear: there is no singular staffing model being used by all elementary schools across Ontario. It's likely that this trend holds true for secondary schools as well. Paying respect to and considering diverse staffing models was reiterated through the composition of the By-Law 2 committee; the OLA By-Law 2 Consultation Committee Terms of Reference, (Ontario Library Association, 2019b), clearly outlines that there is

> "a balance between representatives who are Teacher-Librarians and those who work in the school library sector who are not Teacher-Librarians […from] a mixed staffing board, a board that primarily does not have Teacher Librarians, a board that primarily employs Teacher Librarians, [and includes] elementary and secondary representation" (Ontario Library Association (OLA), 2019c, p. 2).

The intent to create a committee that could adequately represent all of Ontario's school libraries was clear, and further emphasised by committee members from all geographical areas. The motion to change the by-law will affect all members of the OSLA, and the committee needed to represent the interests, skills, and knowledge of school library workers from across Ontario working in rural, suburban, and urban school libraries. This was effectively achieved by ensuring a wide variety of school library professionals were part of the committee, who have all been noted on the By-Law 2 committee web page (OLA By-Law Consultation Committee, 2019a).

It became obvious during introductions that, regardless of education level, current occupation, or past projects, each member had experience working or discussing the tension around roles and responsibilities that can sometimes be part of working in school libraries. Bringing this diverse group together provided a representative sample of school library professionals. The committee agreed that feeling safe and respected in our positions could be a root cause to growing unease within our industry – each of us, regardless of position, want to feel as if we are creating meaningful and valuable work in an effort to support student success. While conducting research for this paper, much of the professional documentation on creating successful library learning commons made frequent mention of teacher-librarians, with far fewer mentions of other professionals who may be in a school library leadership role.[1] The language in OLA By-Law 2 wasn't reflective of the varied professionals and roles found in many school libraries, which made the need for a diverse committee even more imperative. The committee was created with an intent to reflect the realities in Ontario school libraries. It's composition provided the foundation for a participatory and collaborative work process that was rooted in fair and reflective representation of all affected groups, effectively ensuring that engagement in the process was equitable across all sectors.

The Framework: Bridging Integrative Thinking and the LCC

Integrative thinking was a new concept and tool to all of the committee members. While some committee members had heard of design thinking, none had actively worked with

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[1] Two Canadian examples are *Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons: A vision for the 21st century*, (Ontario School Library Association (OSLA), 2010), and *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (Canadian School Libraries (CSL), 2020). Both documents were discussed during the committee meetings.

integrative thinking before being selected for this project. The committee was fortunate to work with the associate director of I-Think, Nogah Kornberg. I-Think is a "non-profit organization that builds future-ready problem solvers, who tackle messy, complex real-world challenges with tenacity, optimism and confidence" using Roger Martin's innovative integrative thinking method (I-Think, 2019a). At its core, integrative thinking is about finding a new solution or pathway by embracing opposing ideas, and begins with "an openness to learning from other people's ideas, especially those ideas that conflict with our own" (I-Think, 2019b). After being introduced to the philosophy and methodology virtually, and then being able to actively engage in the process during the committee's two-day intensive conference, there was obvious and valuable insights gained from this new way of problem-solving. Moreover, the prospect of using new methodologies for a tension that had been apparent to in the industry for some time meant that the committee was able to think about and create new pathways towards building their recommendations. Embracing this new method of problem-solving allowed for difficult conversations and challenging problems throughout the industry to be discussed. Using integrative thinking allowed committee members to be honest and direct about experiences, ideas, and challenges while also being actively open to opposing ideas and conflicting solutions.

Additionally, the intentional composition of the committee and the use of integrative thinking methods has similarities in ideologies regarding successful school Library Learning Commons (LLC). The physical spaces and programs school library professionals create for school libraries as part of LLC are often centered on learning and collaboration. *Together for Learning*, (Ontario School Library Association (OSLA), 2010), explicitly states that LCC are spaces where "new relationships are formed between learners, […] and both students and educators prepare for the future as they learn new ways to learn" (Ontario School Library Association (OSLA), 2010, p. 3). These concepts are reiterated in *Leading Learning* where "a Learning Commons is a common or shared space that is both physical and virtual […] designed to move students beyond mere research, practice and group work to a greater level of engagement through exploration, experimentation, and collaboration" (Canadian Library Association (CSL), 2014, p. 5). Both of these examples are further supported by other professional documentation where LCC are described as places for innovative and responsive programming and have a focus on collaboration in face-to-face and virtual arenas (Ekdahl & Zubke, 2017, p. 5). Using integrative thinking allowed committee members to function in something similar to a small-scale successful LLC environment: committee members learned new skills, openly and respectfully explored opposing and challenging ideas, and collaborated virtually and in person on a project that has wide-reaching implications to create recommendations which could impact our industry. The integrative thinking framework enabled committee members to gain valuable first-hand experiences of core LLC ideologies, enabling them to embrace participatory and

collaborative learning practices as both learners and leaders by engaging in a new way of thinking and working within a professional setting.

The Process: Inclusive Collaboration and Problem-Solving in Knowledge Work

As mentioned, one of the great benefits of this committee was the diverse perspectives of its members and the opportunity to work collaboratively within the framework of a new problem-solving method. Being able to consult and collaborate virtually, in person, asynchronously, and collectively was a monumental key to the success of the committee at reaching their recommendations. In a paper on collaboration in knowledge-intensive work, Sari, Loeh, and Katzy (2010) explore recurring barriers to collaboration in three organizations[2]. One of the main arguments made in their paper was that a "rethinking of coordination and collaboration principles in professional work" could be needed for knowledge workers to actively participate in and collaborate on knowledge-intensive projects (Sari, Loeh, & Katzy, 2010, p. 48). Their argument for new ways of engaging in collaborative work, specifically for knowledge workers, is easily applied to the work done by the OLA By-Law 2 committee. Presented with the need to support all OSLA school library workers across Ontario meant that organizers had to engage in equitable and varied collaborative practices that enabled all members to actively participate in solution creation. Members had a two-day intensive conference where challenging ideas and integrative solutions were explored through facilitated workshops. Additionally, members were given numerous opportunities before and after this workshop to ask and answer questions through email and teleconferences that further informed and influenced the work undertaken in the face-to-face workshops. Varied collaboration and participatory learning practices also support the ideologies regarding LLC mentioned above. The creation of the committee and the working framework and overall collaboration process for this project reflect, support, and engage many of the necessary ideologies and philosophies that are encouraged and promoted throughout school LLC in Ontario. The committee was created as a chance to examine OLA's by-law 2, and could only successfully and actively do so by engaging in collaborative practices that allowed committee members and OSLA members to be heard, respected, and represented in the final recommendations.

The Result: Representation and Respect in a Changing Industry

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[2] Similar work has been published examining the routines and collaboration practices of knowledge workers and the exchange of tacit and explicit information in knowledge work both virtually and in person; see McAfee (2006), Power (2013), Pyoria (2009), Steele & Boudett (2009), and Drucker (1999).

It became apparent during discussions that one of the largest tensions in the industry is being created by restrictive budgets and a misunderstanding of the explicit and tacit knowledge bases of school library professionals. This is sometimes problematic at all levels of the organization, and can result in role overlap, blurred occupational lines, and indicates a growing need for all library professionals to be respected throughout their larger organization. This trend is apparent in other areas of librarianship. In a paper published in *Partnership*, James, Shamchuk, and Koch (2015) examined some of the changes that librarians and library technicians have been experiencing in their roles. Nearly half the respondents were library and information technology diploma graduates, approximately 22% of those working in K-12 school environments (James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015, p. 7-8). The results of the research found that "both groups appear to be performing more tasks that are new to their domain" and "that work responsibilities are often perceived to be overlapping" (James, Shamchuk, & Koch, 2015, p. 13). These arguments have been previously explored and noted in research about Australian libraries by Hill (2014), who argued that "task division in libraries is often not clear-cut and linear, due to a number of factors" (Hill, 2014, p. 28). Hill continues to argue that "many [research participants] thought that task overlap was a reality of the industry" however, "equitable task division ensures that [library professionals] feel empowered in their positions" (Hill, 2014, p. 28). While these papers speaks specifically to the roles of librarians and library technicians, and notably do not include teacher-librarians, the arguments corroborate some of the discussion points the committee had during their two-day workshops. Some of these discussions and tensions were recorded and can be found in the committees tension and opposition models found in the OLA By-Law 2 Committee Workshop Report (Ontario Library Association (OLA), 2019b).

During the two-day workshop, the discussions around the changing roles and responsibilities for school library professionals mirrors much of what was found in the research noted above. The committee realized that focusing on the guiding question, established at the very beginning of the consultation process, would best inform and guide the integrative thinking and collaborative work necessary to respect all positions necessary for creating a robust school LLC and represent these positions in the By-Law 2. The guiding question wasn't prescriptive of the committees' deliverables, but provided a high-level objective for committee members to work towards, and off of which they could build their recommendations. Their question "How might the OLA ensure all roles are collaborating in service of being a strong, united voice for school libraries?" allowed committee members to have a touchstone when discussions and collaborative work ventured off-topic. The committee was split into two working groups during their in-person workshop and ultimately produced two sets of two opposing solutions. These solutions would help answer the guiding question and create recommendations for the by-law and OLA/OSLA that would equitably represent and respect all school library professionals, without deskilling or devaluing any particular position. This further

emphasizes the need for an engaged and collaborative committee; being able to openly and responsively talk about equitable representation, opportunity and education, and job security was a key aspect to understanding and unpacking the need for and challenge with change in the OLA's By-Law 2.

The Path Forward: Next Steps in Collaborative Professionalism

The work done and recommendations created by the By-Law 2 consultation committee is, as the cliché goes, merely the beginning. The discussions and participatory learning experience the committee experienced during the project timeline now needs to happen in a wider arena. The committee recognized that the intense and necessary work that was done for these recommendations would need to be fostered and shared with other school library professionals as a method for creating strong school libraries and strong school library leaders. Out of these recommendations and the work of the committee came a clear and necessary focus for school library professionals to continue working towards collaborative and participatory workspaces for their students, but also for their professional networks and endeavours; if we as an industry see the value in collaborative environments and skills for our students, we should encourage and embed these practices in our own professional engagements, as seen in this committee's work.

One of the most impactful results of the committee's work is a better understanding of leadership in school libraries, specifically as we further embrace the digital age. Past American Library Association President Maureen Sullivan notes that "today's libraries require each of us to be a leader, whether by position held or by opportunity taken" (Sullivan, 2013). Bringing together diverse school library professionals, introducing new solution-seeking skills, creating a space for innovative participatory collaboration, and allowing the committee to openly respond to tensions in their industry fostered a fertile ground for recommendations and potential future work that will adequately, equitably, and respectfully represent the needs and positions of OSLA members across Ontario in By-Law 2. The OLA By-Law 2 consultation committee engaged in thoughtful, responsive, and respectful communication practices that resulted in recommendations intended to holistically represent the OSLA membership and encourage open, integrative, and collaborative professionalism across all school libraries in Ontario. The work done by this committee also provides a foundation for further research into the changing roles of knowledge workers and school library professionals, and the influence of varied leadership roles and positions in libraries that could impact or reflect the broader library industry.

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