

“The library is in the hallways? That’s crazy!”
Transforming a traditional school library into an embedded library model

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In February 2021, approximately a year after the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered the use of the physical spaces at Mulgrave School, school leadership announced its intention of splitting the library space serving preschool through grade 12 grades into two branches. The branch I became responsible for - the Junior School Library - would not be housed in a single room but primarily embedded in areas outside the junior school classrooms : hence the title of my paper, which comes from a comment by a kindergarten student. While outside the norm for most library designs, this model is not as strange as it may first seem. An embedded library foregrounds accessibility and user agency. By sharing my experiences, other institutions and librarians might consider how to adapt aspects of this model to their own practice.

Pre-Pandemic Questioning

Even before I joined Mulgrave School’s library services in 2017, the librarians and school leadership were debating the use and location of the library space. Mulgrave, the International School of Vancouver, was established in 1993 and is a PK-12 International Baccalaureate (IB) School. When the core of the school’s current campus on Cypress Mountain was built, the library was designed to be a “destination space” on the top floor of the school, taking advantage of beautiful views of the Vancouver skyline and ocean while housing book collections, resources and study space for all students and teachers. Over time, the library and its digital collections gained the description “Library Learning Hub” or LLH.

As the school grew, the library strained to serve all students from preschool to grade 12. Pre-K and junior classes had a weekly library block for book selection and library and information literacy lessons. The resulting noise and activity led to many middle school and upper school students commenting that it wasn’t their library despite the fact that half of the library space remained reserved for their collections and study space. Once extensions were built onto the lower levels of the school, the upper school spaces were increasingly farther away from the Library Learning Hub, adding to the impression that it was a “hike” to reach the library.

The LLH also tried to encompass the “making” aspect of learning by adopting aspects common to Makerspace activities, such as a LEGO wall and activity challenges. However, while students clearly enjoyed these areas, they never seemed to achieve a consistent & structural educational purpose. This impression is in line with the review of Makerspace research conducted by Mersand (2021), without scaffolding and instructional support during maker activities, the outcomes for these spaces are limited, especially when the administrators lack preparation in the new technologies and making tools or teaching and programming with such tools.

Early Impact of the Pandemic (January 2020 - January 2021)

In March 2020, unavoidable change came to Mulgrave School and the LLH as it did to many schools and libraries, as students and teachers shifted to online learning until June 2020.

In some ways, this focussed time was highly useful for the completion of long-planned projects. The most significant of these was the evaluation of existing Indigenous-related materials influenced by efforts of the X̱wi7̱wa Library at the University of British Columbia (Worth, 2019). The librarians also increased their availability for support during online classes using Google Meet and for the LLH's variety of online e-Book and database resources.

In June 2020, classes on campus resumed with strict social-distancing rules and a cohort system to prevent interactions between different student groups. These guidelines necessarily limited access to the physical LLH space as an area for free browsing and library class usage. In addition, mixed cohort Junior School language classes needed to use the flexible classroom space in the LLH to comply with social distancing. To ensure library books could still circulate safely, the librarians instituted a three-day quarantining system for returned books.

Junior School library sessions continued even though the students could not enter the library space. The librarians taught classroom-adapted lessons and brought book carts of librarian-selected books along current class unit themes or genre-promotion. Using a Google form, Students requested books, which librarians would collect and check-out prior to delivering to the classroom. In certain cases, in-classroom lessons proved to be easier as students did not have to spend time transitioning to a new area and teachers were more likely to collaboratively teach. Through these adaptations, the LLH demonstrated how it continued to foster the love of reading and support research skill development without using its current large physical space.

The Concept and Goals of an Embedded-Library Model

Before faculty and students returned from their winter break in January 2021, school leadership met with the librarians to present the new model for the library. The large space which had housed the library for the whole school would become a Junior School-focussed Makerspace. The recent school extension included a Makerspace for the upper school students where they could become "active participant[s] in the learning process--creating, designing, and making" (Holter, 2017), creating a similar space and hiring dedicated staff to manage it for the Junior School was a priority. In looking at the space currently housed by the LLH, school leadership had reviewed scenarios where other technology-oriented schools had moved to digital-only libraries (Frye, n.d.; Antolini, 2009; Fiels, 2015).

In his presentation to the librarians, Mulgrave's Head of School John Wray emphasised this would not be the route for Mulgrave, yet the library's "human and physical resources must become more easily accessible and visible to our staff and students and critically utilised to enhance our students' learning and education" (personal communication, January 27, 2021). To respond to upper school student criticisms that the existing LLH was too connected to the Junior School, a new library

and lounge space specifically for the Middle and Upper School students would be constructed near the cafeteria. The collections targeted at Early Years and Junior Students would utilise a small classroom, the hallways, and shared spaces on the third and second floors of the school. Implementing a self-checkout system would free up librarians' time to regularly monitor and reconfigure front-facing collection spaces as well as volunteers to focus on reshelving books.

To Williams (2015), the school library should be preserved because it is an ideal example of a "third space in the school – that space between the classroom and home" where on-site, individualised, and directed learning and practice can occur. Mulgrave School's embedded model applies the concept of "third space" by merging its interactive potential with the areas where the students already are to serve these core goals for library services:

1. Inspire reading and learning through increased visibility and access to resources

Within Mulgrave, students often move fluidly between communal hallway spaces and the classroom. Even though the LLH was promoted as being constantly accessible for student use, students freely coming to the library outside of library sessions did not happen as frequently as hoped. If a well-stocked and diverse library collection exists but readers do not have meaningful, consistent access to the books, the potential benefits to academic reading achievement and personal reading motivation cannot bear fruit (Miller & Lesesne, 2022, p. 31).

0. Re-imagine the social aspects of the library

UNESCO's "Education in a post-COVID world" (2020), argues that despite the positive proliferation of non-traditional, online learning that emerged during the pandemic, the experiences during this time proved "the school as a physical space is indispensable." Distributing a large, centralized library collection may at first seem counterintuitive to this aim. Yet by placing the collections in the high-traffic, social pathways of the school, the social engagements between students with other students and librarians become more visible. Instead of identifying a single large space as a Learning Hub or Learning Commons to be a free-flow environment for collaborative needs (Grisby, 2015), the existing free-flow environment is enhanced with support in the form of a roving librarian.

0. Foster student and teacher independence

As the expert who knows the library best, it can be more expedient for the librarian to deliver resources based on student or teacher request. However, in the long-term this does not benefit the patron's ability to adopt the use of libraries throughout their lives (International Federation of Library Associations [IFLA], 2021). Open access to collections and self-checkout increases the investment which students make in the borrowing process and releases the librarian's time to teach and to regularly change displays. Teachers could also checkout for themselves quickly and as needed in spare moments during their daily timetables, making them more likely to use the library resources.

The Design Stage

Despite the embedded model's focus on flexibility and displays, a library is not a library without an underlying system of organisation. In order to develop the new physical layout of the Junior School library collections, the librarian worked closely with a project manager. This project manager, who had previously worked on other major school projects, coordinated shelving orders, external and facilities personnel and timelines for the collection movement. At the design stage, the project manager's role was key in explaining the space availability and restrictions and the types of shelving based on budget and space needs. The librarian could then focus on working within those guidelines to identify how to create zones of materials based on existing sublocations.

The contents of the Junior School's thirteen sublocations had to be relocated in a way that would preserve their cohesion and allow them to be managed successfully. The third floor hallway is not straight and regularly broken up by doors, windows, and furniture which could not be moved. The hallway space had to be impacted as little as possible to ensure clear traffic flow and meet fire code. The library-designated classroom had the most flexibility because it had open space for freestanding shelves. Still, it was undeniable that the Jr. Non-Fiction collection in its entirety could not fit in that room without more shelving. However, too much shelving would make the classroom more like a traditional storage room than an active learning space (Grigsby, 2015).

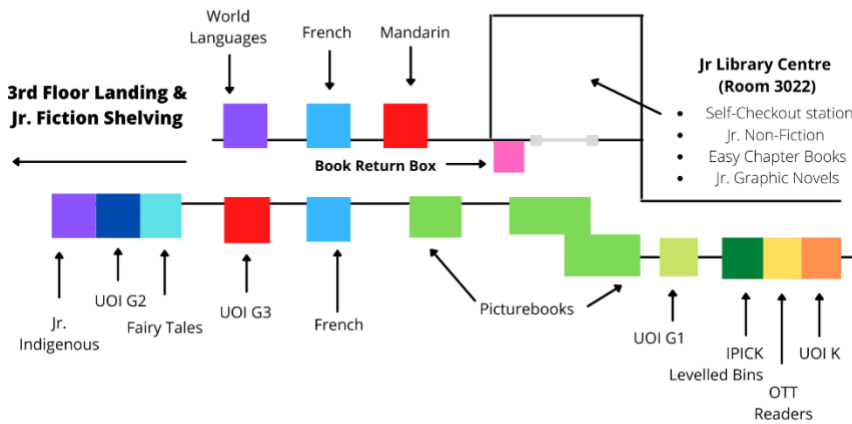
By necessity, certain sublocations would be farther from grades than others. Although the second floor had the greatest availability of wall space, only the grade four and five classrooms are on that floor. If an entire sublocation was permanently located there as per original drafts, younger students who would have the most difficulty travelling to that area would be effectively cut off from it. In assessing this issue, the librarian proposed adding shelving outside and adjacent to the former library in the third floor landing connecting to the second floor classrooms. By locating all the Jr. Fiction in this area in a semi-circular layout, high-level readers in the lower grades could more easily access desired chapter books while still locating them as close as possible to the more independent grade four and five students.

In order to accommodate the space challenges, seven new sublocations were created, six grade-specific and one location-specific. The set of six grade-specific areas are known as the "Grade ___ Unit of Inquiry Displays". This description is based on the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme where the year-long curriculum proceeds through six transdisciplinary units of inquiry (International Baccalaureate, 2022). Prior to this new library model, the librarians checked out and delivered sets of books related to that grade's current unit to be shared among the teachers. While the service was appreciated, it was difficult to track whether the books were being used in a meaningful way. With this model, relevant books are reassigned from their typical sublocation to the "Unit of Inquiry" display during the time of its teaching.

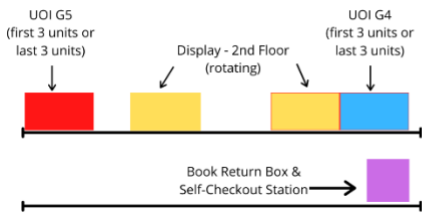
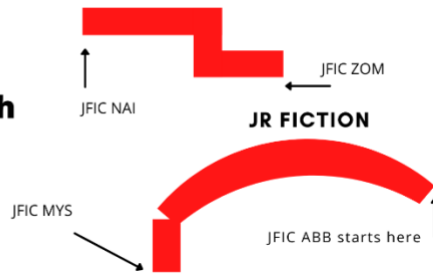
Figure 1.

Embedded Library Sub-Location Maps

Third Floor Hallway Library Sublocations



3rd Floor Landing with Jr. Fiction Shelving



2nd Floor Library Sublocations

The transdisciplinary intent of these resources is highlighted as picture books, non-fiction books and chapter books with varying perspectives are attractively displayed near the grade classrooms. On the second floor near the grade four and five classrooms, multiple unit of inquiry displays exist at once. Relocating large numbers of books to the second floor reduces the amount of shelf space needed on the third floor. Because the content and reading level of these books are less likely to be relevant to

younger grades, there are fewer instances where students would be separated by distance from a desired book.

The additional shelving on the fourth floor is used for even-more frequently rotating displays. These displays may be related to a cross-grade focus such as Orange Shirt Day, Remembrance Day, etc. or topic/genre specific. Because the BC Curriculum requires students at these levels to identify and respond to genres of text (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022), this space allows students to encounter “a book flood—reliable, constant access to a wide range of options” (Miller & Lesesne, 2022, 43). In Canada, 37% of children ages 9-12 are frequent readers for fun which is a distinct drop from 50% of children ages 6-8 (Scholastic Canada, 2017). The flexibility of the displays allow them to respond to student interests and constantly expose them to new books every day.

Implementation Stage

Once designs had been finalised, attention shifted to the process of moving the collections. The current library needed to be fully vacated and cleared by June 30, 2021 for construction work to begin on the new Makerspace. Simultaneously, the library had to transfer the school’s textbook purchasing and storage management to other staff and systems. When overtaking such a major shift in library space and services, it is important to be realistic that certain services cannot continue given the new responsibilities that will arise from the new model. Many parents and students offered to help throughout this massive task. Given this deadline, responsibilities, and personnel resources, the move was projected to be completed and was using the following timeline:

Timeline

- March - May 2021 - inventorying and weeding collections then shifting to large wheeled moving carts by sublocation
- May 14, 2021 - library services would cease for students and faculty
- May 21, 2021 - library space no longer used for classes; only accessible by librarians, facilities team and others assisting with the collection move
- May 24 - 28, 2021 (school’s May Break) - hallway shelving installed and librarians to move hallway collections to hallway locations then cover until next school year start.
- June 1-30, 2021 - move remaining collections to shelves in new library hub room

The thorough inventory and space restraints of the new collections did generate a significant amount of weeding of books for donation: 2383 copies (about 9% of the previous collection). The close collection analysis between March-May was a prime opportunity to identify the books best suited for second floor sublocations, both by genre and by unit of inquiry. As a result, books could be located on specific carts for these areas instead of to their primary sub-location. Still, even the most careful measurements revealed areas of mismatch between projected space requirements and actual space

required. The area where this was most notable was the Jr. Fiction section. Creative reuse of existing library carts into additional shelving solved this problem.

The second phase of the implementation stage was introducing the new model to teachers and students. Over the summer, the library switched all pre-existing barcodes for faculty and students to align with their four digit staff or student number, making it easier to recall to enter at the self-checkout stations. Librarians instructed teachers on the new libraries' layout and the checkout process during the week before students returned to school. Not only could teachers self-checkout at the shared public stations but they could also check-out to any student using the Destiny Back Office app on their mobile device. The librarians projected this would be essential to support students in grade two and below who would find self-checkout difficult.

This session was also a chance for teachers to voice their concerns about the new model. Chief among these were concerns about mess and disruptive noise outside their classrooms. Having this open conversation with the teachers supported the plans for the first weeks of library sessions to heavily focus on library citizenship and essential agreements about how to use the new library in a caring and principled way. After this, lessons moved on to ensuring that students could confidently and independently use the self-checkout system. Afterwards, lessons largely followed similar formats to those delivered during COVID and before while adapting them for the new library spaces.

The Results One Year Later

After a full school year, visual evidence and system statistics clearly demonstrate the benefits of this model. During the year, there were 45,868 checkouts. In comparison, the last pre-COVID school year, 2018-2019, saw 42,249 books checked out. Although over 3,500 books is still a significant increase, the true increase is higher given that previous numbers also include check outs for unit of inquiry books (approximately 600 per grade per year). In the new model, checkouts from the unit of inquiry displays are specifically borrowed, indicating a higher probability of genuine usage. Over time, it also helps the librarian identify which books may not be a good fit for the unit display as they are not being borrowed.

The speed at which grade three to five students memorised their barcodes and the process last fall surpassed my expectations, as did the often voluntary memorization by younger grades later in the year. Students can be seen returning, reading and borrowing books before their classroom doors open and after dismissal. Last year, grades started and ended school on a staggered schedule. This meant that siblings had to wait outside their siblings' classrooms pre-start and pre-dismissal. The bookshelves readily available near them made reading something new an easy option. At the same time, they have taken the lessons to heart about keeping the spaces around the library shelving tidy. The ongoing help of parent volunteers with shelving and shelf-tidying has been essential and deeply appreciated.

Although the librarians felt confident that the greater availability of books would lead to increased circulation, there were concerns that improper use of the open shelving and errors at self-checkout stations might lead to extensive book loss. While there are user errors in accidentally checking out books to another student, usually because the first student forgot to reset the station, the issue can be quickly solved by advising a librarian. As a consequence, students have become more aware of checking

the checkout screen not only for the books they just borrowed but also those still in their account. At the end of year inventories of Junior Library sublocations, 318 books were marked as lost for the time being. It is difficult to compare this to previous years' statistics because a comprehensive inventory of the full collection had not been done for many years. However, given the fears about massive losses, this is much lower and more manageable to monitor over the next few years.

Teacher feedback has also been very positive. In a survey of Junior School teachers in June 2022 about the library and literacy in the past year, from 23 responses, visibility of resources appeared 13 times as a favourite feature and student independence appeared 12 times. As the flipside to the fact students "are constantly inspired and motivated to select books as they are displayed in the hallways", teachers observed tendencies to take out more books than students were actively reading and focussing on certain types of books rather than a variety. Four responses noted difficulties with finding "good fit" books, three for students' ability to locate books and three for checkout issues.

Moving Forward & Ongoing Challenges

While last school year began with some apprehension about how the school would adapt to the model, this year began with a sense of determination to keep the positive momentum moving. From an administrative standpoint, the librarians have a better sense of the time required to monitor and revise the new sublocations. A year of circulation data gives a new perspective on weeding to ensure high quality and up-to-date books can shine on the display. As a result, 1703 additional copies were weeded since September 2021 to be sent to schools impacted by flooding or to neighbourhood organisations.

From a student and teacher perspective, they begin the year understanding how the self-checkout process works or at least only requiring refresher lessons to once more become independent. Given teacher feedback and the grade three to five students' previous quick adoption of self-checkout, grade one and two students have already been given library cards to help them on this process. Weekly library sessions are now 45 minutes long, allowing for more in-depth sessions on understanding and using different library sections and book genres. Students can then move from the role of excited browsers to capable navigators and eventual co-creators in helping the librarians create the displays. In this way, the library can truly be integral to education throughout the school day and beyond its walls at home.

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