

The Elementary Teacher-Librarian Drain in Ontario

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“The reward for doing good work is more work.” The modern teacher-librarian seems to embody that phrase in its entirety. As the teacher-librarian role evolves and changes, the ability to keep high-quality teacher-librarians in Ontario elementary public schools becomes increasingly difficult. Through funding cuts, changes to the role, the vision of the school library learning commons or the elimination of the position, there are now fewer teacher-librarians working in Ontario elementary schools than prior to the start of the pandemic. On the other hand, the best trained leaders in the teacher-librarian role are consistently moving to other positions. Arguably, school leaders want someone who has the knowledge and capacity to do everything that a teacher-librarian is supposed to do but may not want to employ teacher-librarians. The qualifications, skills and knowledge requested by school leadership then does not match the realities of the job. This paper will illustrate that disrupting the current environment for teacher-librarians is required to stop exacerbating issues pertaining to recruiting, training, and retaining high quality individuals to the job.

The processes to hire, train and retain teacher-librarians is broken. To these ends, the teacher-librarian practise is misaligned with current realities and professional qualification. The importance of having a teacher-librarian in schools is understated. However, expectations for teacher-librarians have morphed into a catch all for many schools’ literacy issues. The Ontario School Library Association and the American School Library Associations both have significant talking points to clearly illustrate the teacher-librarians’ best practices, and the expected results of having a qualified and quality teacher-librarian in schools. However, contrary to this information are the realities that hinder much of the teacher-librarian’s ability to serve their students in school communities.

As early as 1982, the role of the teacher-librarian has been documented by needing both qualifications and experience (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982). In 1982, the teacher-librarian was involved in schools as a consultant, curriculum development, instruction, selection of learning resources, management and in program advocacy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982). Decades later, expectations of the individual in the role remains largely the same at some school boards, but the titles have changed (Lupton, 2016). Further, some teacher-librarians have been relegated to only teaching media and technology without recognizing that they are just a part of the purpose of the job. (Lupton, 2016). The misunderstanding of how much the teacher-librarian does makes them susceptible to being forced into the more limited engagement in school communities. Worse, some schools have done a complete disfavoured to their learning community and perceptions of the role by placing less than ideal candidates from the classroom into the library as they would do the “least damage” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Teacher-librarians do not have a monopoly on defining their role. Ministries, school boards and leadership need to clearly codify how the role fits into the vision of their respective learning communities.

Positive perceptions from principals of teacher-librarians place a strong emphasis from them to be an expert at teaching, managing resources, collaborating, technological knowledge, promoting literacy / reading, provider of professional development, leader, information literacy teaching, and collection development (Lo, et al., 2015; Lupton, 2016). With such skill and expertise there should be opportunity and options for a person with these abilities. However, in Ontario, the role is hindered by being limited to half-time employment at many schools. It appears paradoxical to expect such expertise and knowledge only to limit capacity to a half-time position. Moreover, positive perceptions can also be intimidating to individuals unable to meet such Herculean expectations. Those expectations can be better managed if the conditions and requirements for the warranting of the role was much more clearly defined by school leadership.

In contemporary understanding of the role, a teacher-librarian can be assumed to be working in the position when discussing school library or the learning commons. This means that the role is funded and lead by a qualified individual (Ontario School Library Association, 2010). According to the Ontario School Library Association, “the structure of school learning was built more than a century before digital communication was developed, and since then the structure has not changed significantly” (Ontario School Library Association, 2010). Therefore, while the requests for additional skills, knowledge and abilities growth, the environment to support teaching and learning from the teacher-librarians is dated. This leads to misunderstanding managing expectations from staff and administration (Lo, et al., 2015). It creates situations in which the expectations from hiring administration goes above and beyond the capacity of what incoming teacher-librarians can provide (Lupton, 2016). If the expertise of the teacher-librarian is increasingly highly specialized and beyond the scope of classroom teachers, the demand for teacher-librarians should grow alongside the increasing demand in services. However, the truth is that “only 10% of Ontario elementary schools have a fulltime teacher-librarian, compared with 42% twenty-five years ago” (Haycock, 2003, p.11). There is clearly a disconnect from the people hiring and managing teacher-librarians and the work itself. The increasing expectations on individuals in the role has made the job more difficult to perform and less desirable. Simply put, if the demand is there for specialized skill and knowledge, the positions need to be created for those individuals to demonstrate them.

Teacher-librarians demonstrate their value in a different way. Everything about the job is to further teaching and learning. The following scenarios are examples of elementary teacher-librarians with the exceptional case of having a fulltime position as a teacher-librarian. In the Winter 2008 EFTO Voice Magazine, Jody Howcroft shares a snapshot of her daily experience. She shows that 1) the teacher-librarians’ day starts well before the start of the teaching day 2) the functional and collection management aspects of the job are completed as an afterthought to more priority tasks 3) the volume of library specific requests come throughout the day 4) those jobs are done while teaching (Howcroft, 2008). In cases like this, the job of the ‘librarian’ is vastly overshadowed by the demands of the ‘teacher’. Another example from an elementary school in Toronto, shows how effectively a teacher-librarian can engage a school when given the mandate and time to do so (Makin, 2019). Makin showcased teaching practise from kindergarten to grade eight specifically highlighting several “typical”

teacher-librarian activities. Half of her day was prep coverage, partnering and all periods had book exchange. Moving from the specifics of the job itself, she manages administrative tasks outside of the teaching day, made contributions to the culture of the school via information gathering and research, extra-curriculars and even sought to obtain more computers for the school. From these examples, the reality of the needs of the role do not align with the expectations and perceptions of the role.

Conversely, Anita Brooks Kirkland, a Consultant in Libraries and Learning and Chair of the Canadian School Libraries, challenges the myth that “Nobody understands what we do in school libraries...Within the profession, there is sometimes an idea that few understand the role of the teacher-librarian” (Brooks Kirkland, 2019, p. 22). She indicates that “we need to accept some responsibility for the myth. It’s up to all of us to create understanding of the unique value proposition of the school library learning commons” (Brooks Kirkland, 2019, p.22). In this view, the value of the teacher-librarian is determined individually and wholly dependent on their ability to provide value to a school. This positions individual teacher-librarians responsible for advocating for their own roles as opposed to a collective understanding at a school board or Ministry level. This pushes advocacy to the forefront of the teacher-librarian role. Teacher-librarians then can be perceived to at fault for the shortcomings in service of their school community. According to an EBSCO whitepaper, “Today’s school librarians must work harder than ever to prove their value to students, educators, administrators, and parents. Thus, the role of advocacy in school librarianship is critical” (EBSCO, 2017, p.2). The value proposition positions the role as one that must generate gains wholly on the backs of a single individual in a school learning community. “To prove the value of school library programs, school librarians must, in effect, become strategic marketing managers who weave advocacy efforts into the fabric of their everyday practice. Best practices include building partnerships with influential stakeholders, increasing the school library’s visibility through branding, mentoring teachers in technology integration, seeking ongoing professional development, and engaging with peers in professional organizations and networks” (EBSCO, 2017, p.7).

When looking for a teacher-librarian, school administration is not looking for another teacher. The amelioration of learning and school culture, resource management, consultation, development of curriculum, advocacy and leadership are not enough. They are seeking a solution to the school’s challenges. The teacher-librarian is a skilled individual that comes with many solutions. However, it is near impossible to solve all the issues with literacy and learning when only a single individual is hired in half-time position and is coupled with another demanding specialization such as special education. If that person cannot raise student reading scores or improve any other learning metric single-handedly, the bygone conclusion is to cut that position further or to shutter the school library entirely. It is even more strange considering that is not the purpose of the role. The metrics for engagement in learning collected by teacher-librarians do not necessarily reflect the priorities of standardized testing or reading scores. But when there are limited funds for a school, some administrators just see it as better value to focus budgets elsewhere (Lupton, 2016). In 2019, Teaching Librarian Magazine reported that according to the *State of Elementary School Libraries*, the staffing of teacher-librarians is not being lost to attrition but outright elimination of

the positions (Teaching Librarian, 2019, 22-26). Although the Ministry of Education funding formula indicates that there is to be one full-time teacher-librarian for every 763 students, each school board prioritized school libraries and teacher-librarians differently. The funding for teacher-librarians is not *enveloped* and thus even with this Ministry funding formula, the money can be spent as required by different boards (Ontario School Library Association, 2021). In Ontario, when split into different regions, survey data shows that the average full-time equivalent teacher-librarian per school is: *Northern 0.09, GTA 0.48, Central 0.52 Eastern 0.09 Southwestern 0.18* (Teaching Librarian, 2019, 22-26). The cuts or elimination of teacher-librarians shows that the library and teacher-librarians are not priorities in the education system.

Another phenomenon with regards to the loss of teacher-librarians, is the loss of the “super” teacher-librarian. It is easy to accept the work of a great teacher-librarian as normal, but when there is an averagely skilled teacher-librarian leading and doing work, it is seen as low value (Haycock, 2003). The perception of quality output from the teacher-librarian is that they must be the absolute best and any variation from that lowers value. The mythos of the super teacher-librarian has created a position that is largely impossible to live up to. With this sort of gulf in perception of acceptable work, it is no wonder that teacher-librarians have been cut out of many of the school boards in Ontario. The value of having a qualified teacher does not equate the measure of what is valuable at a school. The requirements of having someone who can teach students, lead professional development, manage a collection and the many other tasks does not work into the calculus when determining the importance of student achievement, school culture and student wellbeing. Sometimes, principals realize that they are asking a lot of one person (Lupton, 2016). Therefore, when an individual does work at such a level, they are often recognized by colleagues. However, once one shows that they can deliver excellence, individuals may find external opportunities to utilize their knowledge and expertise. Analysis of the individual teacher-librarians from the 2017 and 2020 [Treasure Mountain Canada](#) papers shows that 31% of the teacher-librarian leaders are now in different positions. Further, according to anecdotal conversations at the 2022 teacher-librarian network meetings at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), approximately 1/3 of all teacher-librarians are new to the role each year.

The clearest definition of the role the teacher-librarian is to be a teacher first, but it would come as no surprise that the unwritten requirement is to be an advocate for teaching and learning in the school library. At library associations, advocacy is highly encouraged by the leadership and presented as assumed practise. Language that would fit into a marketing pamphlet are taught to promising teacher-librarians to continually promote and self-advocate for their jobs and positions. Catch phrases such as “value added, branding, quality, stakeholders” are asked to be embedded into daily practice (EBSCO, 2017; Ontario Library Association, 2019). However, the examination of the guidelines for teacher-librarian training in different locales indicates that the training of teachers mentions advocacy on a very limited basis. On the Ontario College of Teachers, Additional Qualification Course Guideline, teaching or teach is mentioned 158 times, lead or leadership is mentioned 22 times and advocacy is mentioned twice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2015). Even the updated draft document only mentions advocacy a paltry seven times (Ontario College of Teachers, 2021). The University of British Columbia’s teacher-librarian diploma program hosts the following courses:

Administration of the School Library Resource Centre, Selection of Learning Resources, Organization of Learning Resources, Information Services I, Special Topics in Teacher Librarianship: School Library 2.0, School Library Resource Centre Programs, and Resource-Based Teaching (University of British Columbia, n.d.). Advocacy and how to do it seem to be afterthoughts. When it comes to training new teacher-librarians, advocacy needs to be explicitly stated and promoted. The training then is out of place with the realities of the job. Having to advocate for the role using their own contributions from teacher-librarians demonstrates the lack of necessity for the role with current metrics.

Typical workloads and workflows are perceived as not enough to warrant clear messaging and organization from school boards and Ministries of Education to codify the role into the education system. Training models for new candidates to the roles are failing to adapt to prepare for the realities of the job. Expectations and deliverables for the job far exceed the capacity of average teacher-librarians. The definitions of the role do not match the expected practice. Excellence is not rewarded within the job but by external opportunities. Overt cuts to the both the position and the school library show clear disregard for the good that teacher-librarians bring to schools. In both the United States and Australia, average teacher-librarians doing the job are perceived to have little value. Only the most extraordinary are perceived to be good. In Ontario, the leaders in teacher-librarianship move on at a rate of 31% which matches the TDSB's anecdotal teacher-librarian turnover. This means that many teacher-librarians, if they just "do their jobs", will feel pressure to do even more. If they do demonstrate excellence, the opportunities to demonstrate their skills are improved when leaving entirely. Now an integral part of the role of the teacher-librarian is to continually demonstrate that the job is worthwhile. The targets and metrics of what is worthwhile further exacerbate issues with the perception of what value teacher-librarians bring to schools. The messaging for teacher-librarians and school libraries is not adapting to the changes required on how to advocate.

Further, if we want to continue to see teacher-librarians in schools, the community, Ministry, and school boards need to adjust to how business is conducted. Instead of relying on individual efforts in advocacy, there needs to be better concentrated coordination of support of teacher-librarians. This is not on the individual teacher-librarian alone. The legitimacy and importance of the role must be a shared message from all stake holders. To further the existing processes, boards and ministries need to decide their positions. Either they believe in having school libraries functional with teacher-librarians or they do not. The position of budgetary constraints is a too easy scape goat. While their decisions dither, they can be tight-lipped about future services all the while being complacent in the demise of the school library learning commons. The focus on the past needs to change to that of the future. Much has changed about how the teacher-librarian works, and much of it in the last few years. Schools need such leadership. The vision for school libraries and the teacher-librarian needs to be clearly updated for post-pandemic learning. This double-edged sword lends itself to setting both limits and legitimacy to the scope of the role. Further, the library learning commons is supposed to be a space for learning. The lack of qualified individuals running the space means that the privileged few are the only ones that get to access something that should be common amongst all. Finally, since school libraries

are shuttered at many elementary schools or operate without qualified teacher-librarians, the messaging is clear to the remaining few: “keep up the good work.”

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