

Factors that support the development of exemplary school library programs

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Abstract

This paper will examine a wide range of studies related to the factors that support the development of exemplary school library programs and then focus on the context for Ontario, Canada. In 2003, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (as cited in IASL, 2008) reviewed research studies to answer the question “What effects do school libraries have on student achievement?” and they concluded that “school library *characteristics* may account for up to 8 percent of the variance in reading-related test scores” [emphasis added] (p. 1). Consequently, it is important to identify the characteristics that make a school library exemplary although they are not always indicative of student achievement and learning.

Introduction

There are many factors that support the development of exemplary school library programs: collection size, use of technology, budget allocation, scheduling, collaboration, staffing, instructional programming, administrative support, personal characteristics of the library staff, and educational belief systems. Creating an exemplary school library program is not a simple matter of collecting all the factors together. As Oberg (2000) has argued, a school library can have everything that the research says is needed to support student learning and yet, in fact, can be a force for limiting student learning. On the flip side, some school libraries may lack many of the resources required, based on the literature, but they still make a positive impact on student learning. The impact of reduced resources, both human and material, on the learning success of students must be examined case-by-case. Teacher-librarians need to take charge of the factors they have control over, work on the factors that they might have influence over, and (temporarily, at least) accept the factors that are beyond their control.

Factors that support the development of exemplary school library programs

Lonsdale (2003) argues that the impact of exemplary school libraries on student achievement is the result of a complex interaction of variables (p. 25). Researchers use different terms or categories to describe the factors, both human and material, that support the development of exemplary school library programs, but in this paper, I will group them into the following broad categories: purchases, policies and practices, and people and philosophy.

Purchases

Collection size, availability of technology, and budget allocation to the library are components that can enhance the school library’s positive effects on learning.

Collection Size

The size of a school library’s collection has an impact on creating an exemplary program (see, for example, Elley, 1992). A healthy, well-stocked, current collection of print and non-print resources offers students a wide variety of materials to choose from for research or for pleasure reading. Elley (1992), in his examination of the reading proficiency of 9 year old and 14 year old students in 32 countries, found that large school libraries, as defined by his study as containing more than 7,000 books in the collection, were associated with increases in literacy scores. Moore and Trebilcock (2003) note that resource quantity does affect educational outcomes but what is more important is how those resources are used (p. 169).

Technology

Having and using technology effectively and with educational aims in mind helps to make a school library an exemplary one (see, for example, Baumbach, 2003; Lance et al., 2002). Technology can include videos as well as computer-related tools such as electronic databases and websites. In Iowa, Lance (2002) and his fellow researchers found a connection between high levels of library staffing, itself a factor of exemplary programs, and the number of computers in the library accessing the library home page (p. 49).

Budget

A large budget is often an indicator of the perceived value of the school library, and the greater the percentage, the more powerful the library (see, for example, Asselin, 2001; Lance et al., 2002, 2003). Lance (2002) asserts that “a strong LM program is one that is adequately staffed, stocked and funded” (p. ix).

Policies and practices

Policies and practices involve how school libraries operate and can be further subdivided into scheduling, collaboration, programming/instruction, and staffing.

Scheduling

For the purposes of this paper, scheduling refers to the times students are permitted to visit or access the library during and beyond instructional times (Koda & Harada, 1989; Lance et al., 2002) and to the type of schedule a teacher-librarian has to see classes. The types of schedules are often referred to as fixed, in which a teacher-librarian sees a particular class for a set period every week, or flexible, in which a teacher-librarian has an open schedule that can be booked for a short or long period of time with a particular group to work on a specific project (see, for example, Van Deusen as cited in Haycock, 1999; Van Deusen, 1991). Mixed schedules, combining a fixed and flexible timetable, are also possible. A schedule conducive to arranging purposeful time in the library is characteristic of exemplary school library programs (see, for example, Haycock, 1996; Lance et al., 2005). Flexible scheduling appears to support more frequent library use by individual students (see, for example, Fedora, 1993; Lance, 2000a). The case has been made in other studies that there are some advantages to a fixed schedule (Amdursky as cited in Fedora, 1993, pp. 31-34). Van Deusen's (1991) earliest work found that flexible scheduling made the most difference in collaborative evaluation practices but not necessarily in other curriculum involvement activities (p. vii); subsequent work by Van Deusen (as cited in Haycock, 1999) revealed other advantages to flexible scheduling with regards to the teacher-librarian's leadership role and collaboration (pp. 225-226). The majority of research supports the use of flexible scheduling over fixed scheduling; however, it is possible to have positive results with a mixed schedule. More consultation, more integrated information skills lessons, and more involvement in student assessment can occur in both mixed and flexible school library schedules (Haycock, 1996). A fully open / flexible schedule is better than a partly open / mixed schedule and a partly open schedule is better than one that is fixed / not open at all (Lance et al., 2000a).

Collaboration

Collaboration is a key factor in creating exemplary school library programs (see, for example, Bell & Totten, 1992; Todd, Lamb, & McNicholas, 1993; Williams & Wavell, 2001). Bell & Totten (1992) found that teachers employed in academically successful schools tended to choose the teacher-librarian significantly more for cooperation on instructional problems than did teachers serving in academically unsuccessful elementary schools. Lance (1993) noted that the degree of collaboration between the library media specialist and the classroom teachers is associated with the ratio of teachers to pupils. Oberg (1990) suggests that collaboration comes with a cost – time spent to plan, teach and assess, a willingness to change practice and compromise. If teacher-librarians establish a positive rapport and shared goals, classroom teachers will see that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the risks.

Programming and Instruction

When the school library program involves team teaching with classroom teachers and direct ties to the regular curriculum, it can begin to qualify as exemplary (see, for example, Sinclair-Tarr & Tarr, 2006). If instruction also involves defining the teacher-librarian's role as curriculum leader, then even more studies confirm this as a factor to developing an exemplary program (Asselin, 2001; Lance et al., 1993, 2002, 2005). After examining an elementary, middle, and secondary school library in their study, Moore and Trebilcock (2003) conclude that there is no one “right” or “best” model of instruction, as long as teacher-librarians maintain and extend the intellectual role of the library in both teaching and learning (p. 163).

Staffing

Staffing refers to the amount of personnel working in a school library and the qualifications and training they possess. What counts as qualified varies from country to country and even from province to province (Asselin, 2001, p. 1). Barring debate on what constitutes adequate training, many studies state that qualified teacher-librarian staffing results in exemplary school library programs (see, for example, Atcherman, 2008; Baumbach, 2003). The amount of staff assigned to the school library also results in higher quality school library programs (Canadian Association of School Libraries, 2003). Shannon (2001) points out in her review of the literature on the education of school library media specialists that ongoing training needs to occur in collaborative teaching, curriculum development, advocacy, and leadership (p. 12).

People and philosophy

Administrators, the personal characteristics of teacher-librarians, and beliefs around learning, change, and collaboration are important to the development of exemplary school libraries.

Administrators

Supportive principals are key to the effectiveness of school libraries (see, for example, Klinger et al., 2009; Yetter, 1994). The administrator plays a critical role in terms of the decisions made for budget allocation and creating timetables that allow for flexible scheduling and teacher collaboration. Principals demonstrate their commitment to school libraries inconsistently. They believe that they should be doing more to support school libraries, but they sometimes misinterpret the support they do provide as being more extensive than it is (Asselin, 2001, p. 8). When teacher-librarians meet with their principals frequently, the library personnel act more as curriculum co-leaders and this benefits the library program (Lance, 2000; Yetter, 1994). Lance (2002) recommends that principals set the tone in their school for how the teacher-librarian is regarded (p. 91). Yetter (1994) offers a list of traits she considers vital for supportive principals - respect, trustworthiness, honesty, genuineness and organization (p. 232).

Personal Competencies of the Teacher-Librarian

In several studies, another category or factor that affected the quality of a school library program was identified: the characteristics, knowledge, skills, and abilities of the teacher-librarian (see, for example, Alexander, 1992; Gehlken, 1993). Yetter (as cited in Lance et al., 2000a) found that exemplary teacher-librarians “were energetic, healthy, and enthusiastic; showed leadership abilities; had theoretical understanding of resource-based learning; had the ability to translate theory into effective instructional plans; and were knowledgeable about specific learning resources” (p. 18). The teacher-librarians in Yetter’s (1994) case studies were admired for their interpersonal and collaborative skills and valued as being both expert teachers and a pleasure to work with (p. 224). Alexander (as cited in Lance et al., 2000) noted good teacher-librarians were good teachers with excellent classroom management and innovative techniques. Their tasks related to their triple role as teacher, information specialist, and instructional consultant (Alexander, 1992; Gehlken, 1994). Gehlken (as cited in Haycock, 1997) found that exemplary teacher-librarians view their profession as multifaceted and dynamic and are skilled at public relations (p. 27). Their learning space provides support and sanctuary for their students (Gehlken, 1994, p. 139). Klinger (2009) noted that a key attribute of exemplary library programs is “the exemplary teaching skills of the teacher-librarians, coupled with their enthusiasm and ingenuity” (p. 36). In light of these findings on “expert teacher traits,” Callison (as cited in Shannon, 2001) suggested that school media preparation programs should “concentrate on the media person more than the development of the components of the media place” (p. 5).

Teacher-Librarian’s Philosophy of Education

The beliefs of teacher-librarians with regards to learning, change, and collaboration help determine the level of effectiveness of the school library program (see, for example, Moore & Trebilcock, 2003; Oberg, 2000). According to Oberg (2000), the beliefs of the teachers can actually limit the efficacy of the other factors of exemplary school libraries: “Structural changes, such as improved library collections, flexible scheduling, fulltime librarians, and collaborative planning between teachers and librarians, do not directly address the underlying beliefs of educators about the nature of the child, the nature of learning, and the nature of teaching” (p. 22). Lonsdale (2003) agrees with Oberg’s argument, and in her own overview she maintains that, “[r]ather

than focusing on such things as ... collection size ... and technology infrastructure, the focus now must be on outcomes in relation to what students have learned” (p. 9).

Interaction of factors with context: The example of Ontario

All of the factors that create exemplary school libraries interact in conjunction with their setting and context. Ontario’s demographics, unique teacher-librarian training programs, and actions by the provincial Ministry of Education shape the school library programs found there. The Ministry of Education directly affects school libraries with its grants and the documents it produces about libraries. The grants, the documents, and the training of school library staff influence purchasing, policies, and people respectively.

Purchasing – Ontario Ministry Grants

The provincial government has made efforts to address the funding shortfall in elementary school libraries but there are still some concerns. Within the last decade, the Ministry of Education funded the elementary school library system via their Library Investment Project. The Ministry allocated \$15,000,000 in 2008-2009 and \$15,000,000 in 2009-2010 (Howson, 2009, p. 2). The Association of Canadian Publishers criticized this purchasing process (Howson, 2009) because the government objectives lacked a focus on buying Canadian books (p. 2). Others worry that those schools without trained library staff are less likely to purchase Canadian books or materials (People For Education, 2009, p. 13).

Policies – Ontario Ministry Documents

Few Ministry of Education documents deal specifically with school libraries or teacher-librarians. The Education Act of Ontario (as cited in Ontario School Library Association, 2010) states that no teacher shall be placed in charge of a school library program unless he/she is qualified. Only one Ministry of Education document has focused on school libraries. *Partners in Action* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982) was a resource document that described how collaboration between the teacher-librarian and classroom teacher, resource-based learning, and a supportive principal helps students. The role of the teacher-librarian involved six components: consultation, curriculum development, instruction, selection of learning resources, management, and program advocacy (p. 13). *Partners In Action* was revoked in 2009 because it was dated, limited to the elementary panel, and lacked technological references (Ruth Hall, personal communication, March 29, 2010).

Together for Learning (Ontario School Library Association, 2010) is the most recent Ministry-related school library document, although it is not fully adopted by the government. It describes school libraries as learning commons, where teacher-librarians, students, and other learning partners collaborate in flexible physical and virtual spaces, integrating technology, so that everyone can learn how to learn.

Other documents mention school libraries briefly. The Language curriculum (2006) contains a paragraph on the role of the school library in language programs in the section dealing with considerations for program planning. Resource documents such as *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys’ Literacy Skills* (2004) and *Think Literacy: Library Research, Grades 7-12* (2005) provide suggestions on the instructional strategies teacher-librarians and other language teachers can use in their lessons.

People – Ontario Teacher-Librarian Qualifications

Teacher-librarians in Ontario become qualified to take their positions by taking an Additional Qualification course with an accredited university provider. Oberg (1991) recognized this provincial requirement as unique at the time because in the rest of Canada, “teachers in charge of school library programs are not required to have specialist training or certification” (p. 346). Different boards in Ontario staff school libraries in a variety of ways, using paraprofessionals (library technicians), teacher-librarians, or volunteers. Staffing has been a focus of several of the Ontario studies dealing with school libraries.

Conclusion

Many studies in countries throughout the world have indicated that exemplary school libraries have a positive impact on student achievement and on learning. Lonsdale (2003) notes that different studies measure the concept of student achievement in various ways. Some use quantitative approaches such as comparing school library

characteristics to standardized tests results (see, for example, Lance et al., 2009), while others use small-scale qualitative studies (see, for example, Todd & Kuhlthau, 2004). Regardless, worldwide studies indicate that school libraries have the potential to support student achievement. However, it cannot be merely the existence of school libraries that maximizes learning. In 2003, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (as cited in IASL, 2008) reviewed research studies to answer the question “What effects do school libraries have on student achievement?” and they concluded that “school library *characteristics* may account for up to 8 percent of the variance in reading-related test scores” [emphasis added] (p. 1). Consequently, it is important to identify the characteristics that make a school library exemplary and are therefore vital to student achievement and learning. These factors are helpful in determining how school libraries can be improved but cannot act as a checklist for determining an exemplary school library. Oberg (2000), Callison (as cited in Shannon, 2001), Lonsdale (2003), and Klinger (2009) stress that it is the strength of the individual in the school library, their underlying beliefs about learning and the quality of learning experienced by the students that can overcome deficiencies in any of the other factors. Teacher-librarians need to change factors they have control over, challenge the factors that they might have influence over, and come to terms with the factors that are beyond their control.

Come to terms with the factors beyond control

Some factors are not possible for teacher-librarians to change directly. In Ontario, ratios for teacher-librarian allocation in a school are determined by school boards. School funds are distributed at the discretion of the principal. Technology and collection sizes are directly linked to the amount of money available to spend, and school budgets must cover everything from photocopying to professional development. Depending on the amount of available teachers able to provide preparation time coverage, the principal may alter the schedule of the school library staff.

Challenge the factors that are influential

Teacher-librarians can work to alter circumstances. Staffing decisions in Ontario schools are often made through consultation with the staffing committee. Membership on the committee is often voluntary, so attending these meetings and providing evidence of need might change the mind of a principal genuinely interested in making the best staffing decisions for his/her school. Budgets can be augmented through the use of fundraising ventures by the teacher-librarian or parent council. When schedules are restricted, some Ontario teacher-librarians attempt “parallel units” rather than true “partner units”, where teacher-librarians mirror the topics covered in the regular classroom but focus on the research aspect, for example.

Change factors that are controllable

What teacher-librarians think and how they behave cannot be dictated or manipulated by external forces. The core work of the teacher-librarian is that of creating and adapting to change. Like Klinger (2009), Moore and Trebilcock (2003) stress that there is no one right or best model of a school library program because “the combination of similarities and differences gives each school library team a distinctive character” (p. 163). Therefore, exemplary school libraries are possible to create, even in the absence of several factors.

Three key learnings

- A school library can have all the factors for an exemplary school library program and inhibit student learning while the converse is true; therefore the beliefs of the person placed in the school library is crucial to its success and impact on student learning
- Purchases, policies, practices, people and philosophy are factors that support the development of exemplary school library programs.
- There is no one right or best model of a school library program because they reflect the individual school culture

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