



By Dr. Don A. Klinger & Kathryn Blackett

The Case for Maintaining and Supporting School Libraries

Two recent major studies have examined the conditions in Canada's school libraries: Ken Haycock's *The Crisis in Canada's School Libraries* (2003) and *Canadian School Libraries and Teacher-Librarians* by David Coish (2005). Both show ample evidence that after nearly two decades of federal and provincial cuts to education funding, libraries once seen as integral to schools, have come to be considered increasingly peripheral and susceptible to funding cuts.

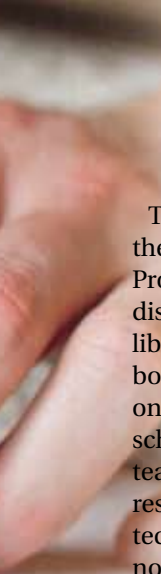
Currently, school libraries in most provinces are showing deteriorating collections and declining levels of staffing (British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' Association, 2005; Learning Resources Council, 2005;

Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick, 2005). Many school libraries are now staffed by parent volunteers or students and are closed for long periods of the day or whole days of the week (Haycock, 2003). All of these symptoms are visible in Ontario, which experienced significant cuts to education funding in the 1990s.

While the current provincial government has attempted to redress some of these financial cuts, school libraries continue to suffer. Results from the most recent survey conducted by the People for Education (PFE) found that 54% of Ontario elementary schools in 2005/2006 reported having a teacher-librarian for some or all of the time, compared to 80% of

schools in 1997/1998. Approximately 10% of schools reported a full-time teacher-librarian, a result that has been consistent since 2002/2003, but represents a significant drop from 25% of schools in 1998/1999.

Because funding for school libraries in Ontario is not protected, school boards often use this money to cover shortfalls in other areas. Ontario's per-pupil funding formula does not enable schools with small student populations to generate enough funding to provide well-staffed libraries. Likewise, boards which have many small schools (rural boards, for instance) are challenged just in providing adequate classroom and administrative staff.



The result, according to data from the People for Education Tracking Project (2005), is a considerable disparity in the presence of teacher-librarians across the province. Some boards have chosen not to have on-site teacher-librarians in their schools, instead employing itinerant teacher-librarians, central librarian resource staff, and/or library technicians. Library technicians do not have teaching certification and are paid significantly less.

Further, both teacher-librarians and technicians are being replaced or supplemented with other teaching staff, parent volunteers, or students. Consequently, while 87% of schools in South/Central Ontario reported the presence of a teacher-librarian either full or part-time in 2005/06, only 10% of Northern schools reported having a teacher-librarian. Approximately 25% of Northern schools reported that the library was unstaffed. Similarly, teacher-librarian-to-student ratios were found to range from a high of one teacher-librarian for every 1,526 students in Southwestern Ontario, to one teacher-librarian for every 673 students in South/Central Ontario.

The Increasing Accountability Framework in Canadian Education

Public education has entered the realm of accountability, with expectations of ensuring student achievement on key measures of learning. At the same time, there has been an increased use of large-scale assessments to support these accountability efforts and guide instructional and policy decisions that support system improvement and growth. As evidenced by the current provincial assessment programs in Canada, large-scale assessments have become prominent aspects

of educational reform and the educational accountability. In Ontario, the 1996 Accountability Act led to the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to provide indicators for accountability, and to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education in Ontario (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2005). Province-wide, large-scale assessments followed and are currently used to assess, monitor, and help improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

Examining the Current Problem in Canada

But are efforts to ensure higher levels of literacy achievement being hampered by the educational cuts that have resulted in decreased library funding and staffing?

While the emphasis on literacy has produced specialised literacy programs and staff, there has not been a commitment to school libraries and teacher-librarians. Yet international studies dating back to the 1960s support the link between school libraries and increased student achievement (e.g., Haycock, 2003; Lance, 2002, 2004; Marchant, Broadway, Robinson, & Shields, 1984).

Unfortunately, advocates for Canadian school libraries have had no national research to support such links within a Canadian context. In April, 2006, the results of the first Canadian study to investigate the relationship between students' performance on large-scale provincial assessments and school library staffing and resources were released. The study was supported by the Ontario Library Association, and involved a unique partnership between researchers in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University and People for Education (PFE),

a provincial parent group which annually surveys Ontario's schools about staff and resources.

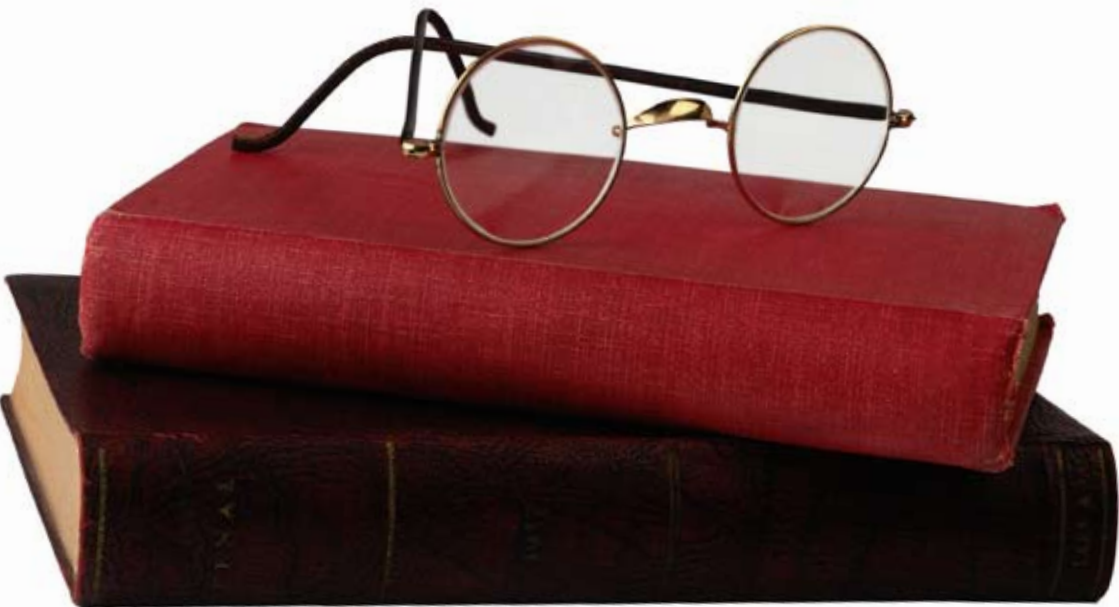
Data from more than 50,000 grade 3 and grade 6 students was coupled with information regarding school and library resources from more than 800 of Ontario's publicly funded elementary schools to complete the research. The sample represented approximately 22% of Ontario's elementary schools and grades 3 and 6 students. Two sources of information were used in the study. The reading achievement results and attitudes towards reading (reading enjoyment) of grades 3 and 6 elementary students were obtained from the 2004/2005 Provincial assessments. School information came from the voluntary school survey conducted by the People for Education (PFE). The PFE's 2004/2005 survey items on library staffing, hours of operation, collections, and fundraising were used in the study. The intent of the research was to determine if there exist significant associations between aspects of school libraries and students' achievement or enjoyment of reading.

The School Library, Student Achievement, and Reading Enjoyment

Using predictive models, we found significant associations between the school library and measures of student achievement and reading enjoyment. Among the findings:

Schools without professional library staffing tended to have lower achievement on the grades 3 and 6 reading tests (both in terms of average achievement and attaining the provincial standard or higher).

Schools with trained library staff were more likely to have a higher proportion of grade 6 students attaining the provincial standard or higher on reading tests.



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In terms of achievement, library-related variables tended to have the largest association with grade 6 reading achievement—accounting for approximately 3% to 4% of the variance in reading achievement. These associations were comparable with previous American research. While relatively small, such associations are important, since they are derived from indirect supports (the school library), rather than those from direct teacher and classroom effect. And they affect the

the school.

The findings for the attitudinal responses regarding reading enjoyment provided perhaps the most interesting outcomes of the study. The presence of a teacher-librarian was the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment for both grades 3 and 6 students. The study also found that in schools with grade 3 students who enjoyed reading, grade 6 students were more likely to say they enjoyed reading. In light of this finding, one can speculate that the presence of a teacher-librarian can have an association with a life-long enjoyment of reading.

presence of teacher-librarians may not only impact student achievement but also students’ attitudes towards reading. The importance of positive attitudes towards reading cannot be underestimated. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) argues that students who have access to interesting library resources, develop a deeper love of reading and learning. Using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, research identified that children who enjoyed reading, read a diversity of materials, spent more time reading for enjoyment and had higher achievement in reading, science, and mathematics (Bussière, Cartwright, Crocker, Ma, Oderkirk, & Zhang, 2001, p. 30).

Interestingly, Canada was among the countries where the associations were the greatest. This study provides the first evidence that the teacher-librarian may play an important role in developing a love for reading in elementary-age children.

While the study has been hailed as a great start, it is clear that more Canadian research is needed to investigate further the impact of school libraries on student achievement. Future studies will need to focus on the effects over time, the impact of libraries on students at risk, and the associations for students

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and schools facing socio-economic challenges.

Further research is still needed to better understand how school libraries affect student achievement and reading enjoyment. Previous research has relied on methods that are unable to provide evidence that school libraries actually influence achievement or enjoyment. Nor does the research that has been completed help identify which actions of teacher-librarians have the greatest associations with relevant student outcomes. For example, a relevant aspect of student literacy is a measure of variety of reading. Students who have experience reading a variety of reading genres also tend to demonstrate higher reading engagement, enjoyment, and success.

It is possible that effective teacher-librarians are better able to introduce students to a wider variety of reading genres and help students choose reading materials that are appropriate and engaging. Professionally trained teacher-librarians may also be better able to create learning partnerships with classroom teachers. Hence, there is a need to more closely examine the structure and functioning of successful school libraries and the relationship of these libraries with the school community.

Over the past five years, the percentage of students stating that they like to read has declined steadily at the same time that school libraries have experienced a continual decline in the presence of teacher-librarians. In light of this and the findings of this study, the research report has called for the provincial government to recognise the value of school libraries and commit to adequately fund them. And because Ontario school library staffing and resources continue to deteriorate annually, the report asks that until this research is complete and the value of this educational resource is ascertained, the decline in Ontario's school libraries be halted.

To see the full report, go to: <http://www.peopleforeducation.com/reports/library/OLAstudy.pdf>.

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