

Exemplary School Libraries: The Centre of All the Action

by **Elizabeth A. Lee and Don A. Klinger,**
Queen's University

Our observations of exemplary school libraries confirm what one teacher-librarian said about school libraries,

“We are the centre of all action... where teachers and students start their day and travel to the library during the day and end their day.”

Exemplary school library programs provide a central learning and instruction role in a school. The teacher-librarians in such programs commonly collaborate with other teachers and find ways to engage the community to support children's learning. This vision of the library as a classroom and a welcoming place of learning emerges as a key facet of an exemplary school library program.

Reported here are some of the highlights from the OLA commissioned report, *Exemplary School Libraries*, that was completed in conjunction with People for Education. The full report is available on the OLA website, www.accessola.com.

Our work involved eight elementary schools from three Ontario school boards. We carried out two relatively detailed case studies that included observations of the library program, and interviews with teacher-librarians, teachers, administrators, and volunteers. Six smaller case studies omitted the observations from the data collection. We also surveyed 350 students from 21 Grades 4, 5, and 6 classrooms in these eight schools.

Two characteristics identified exemplary programs. First, the teacher-librarian developed a program that maximized the amount of time devoted to teaching. Second, the teacher-librarian continually strove to modify the existing context to enhance the role of the library program.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT

While we were able to identify similar characteristics of these exemplary library programs, it was not possible to identify a simple set of desirable school library attributes. Contextual factors within the school and the neighbourhood facilitate or hinder implementation of library programming. Context included factors such as board policy, funding and staffing models, administrative models, demographic characteristics of the school population, principal and teacher knowledge and skills, physical features of the

library, history of the school library, and volunteer availability. Hence, exemplary programs were defined as being exemplary within the context in which they operated. The knowledge, expertise, and experience of the teacher-librarian were key to maximizing the role of the school library program within the context that the library program operated.

Classroom teachers' knowledge, expertise, and openness were also essential contextual factors affecting the impact of the school library program on instruction and learning. As teachers become more aware of the instructional supports and roles the teacher-librarian can provide, the quality of the collaborations improve, to the benefit of the students. Hence, context is not static, but rather is shaped by the teacher-librarian's efforts to change it. In exemplary programs, the context evolves through the continuous efforts of the teacher-librarian. We have used these contextual factors to create a continuum of exemplary school library programs.

CONTINUUM

Each level of the continuum describes the contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the library program. These levels represent shifts across library programs. Higher levels on the continuum are characterized by a greater emphasis on student instruction and a deeper integration of the library program into all aspects of the school. Throughout the continuum, an exemplary school library program requires a teacher-librarian who is a change agent, striving to alter both the context and the program.

Level 1 programs face many limiting contextual factors. Teachers and principals have a limited understanding or ability to support the instructional role of the school library. Teacher-librarians typically provide independent instruction that is not typically coordinated with the classroom. Collaborative opportunities are not systematic. Teacher-librarians in these schools recognize the limiting factors and initiate procedures that free time to provide instruction, and continually work to develop partnerships in order to be more directly involved in instruction. As one librarian said, "Sometimes I have to go out and hunt people down."

Level 2 programs have fewer constraints, with more administrative support. The principal recognizes the poten-

tially important role of the school library program and helps to initiate procedures to incorporate the school library into the broader school culture. Principals provide partial funding of prep coverage so the librarian can focus on instruction. Teachers are more open to working cooperatively, acknowledging the important role of the teacher-librarian, "I can't even imagine a literacy program without the support of your library and librarian. I think she's the key; she'll come in and do anything." School culture with respect to use of the school library has changed, largely through the librarian's efforts and these teacher-librarians are increasingly able to coordinate their instruction with classroom teachers.

Level 3 has an enabling context. The library has prioritized support and funding from the administration. The teachers in the school share the vision of the library as a place for learning and teaching; the library is strongly integrated into the school's teaching. Ongoing collaborative teaching between the librarian and classroom teachers is a given. These teacher-librarians provide ever-changing support to teachers based on shared needs. One remarked, "What I really try to do is to listen to teachers and try to figure out how I can best support them." Not surprisingly, such teacher-librarians exemplified the notion of life-long learners, seeking opportunities to acquire new skills and enhance their program. As one librarian commented, "I took a full year of drama training and created a literacy through drama program and reported on drama expectations for the teachers."

Level 4 programs are similar to Level 3 programs, but they also have systematic administrative support at the school, school board, and provincial levels—both in funding and policy. We were unable to categorize any programs as Level 4, as unfortunately, school libraries in Ontario receive intermittent support. This lack of systematic support will continue to hinder the development of exemplary library programs and it is only due to the outstanding professionalism of these librarians that we were able to observe a number of Level 3 programs.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE LIBRARY

We also surveyed a number of students in each of the schools, typically those in Grades 4 to 6. Our student sample consisted of 57% girls and the average age of the students was 10.4 years. Just under three quarters of the stu-

dents were born in Canada, but only 50% listed English as their first language, with Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese) being the most commonly reported other language. Based on provincially available information, this sample generally represents the diversity of the student population found in these schools.

These students were very positive about their school libraries with over 60 % stating they would like to be able to use the school library more often—“It has SO MANY BOOKS!” Students were also very positive about the school librarian and the services provided by the school librarian, “We have a great librarian that is smart, nice, and is always a happy person!” Overall, 80% of the students believe they learned a lot from the librarian, and 90% of students believed their teacher-librarian to be knowledgeable and helpful.

In terms of the librarians’ roles and responsibilities, the students responded that the librarian taught students how to do research (92%), and use the computer (65% to 80%). Interestingly, over 60% of the students reported that teacher-librarians came to their classrooms. Most surprisingly, only 40% of the students thought the teacher-librarian knew what kinds of books they liked to read! This may reflect students’ perceptions about the limitations of a particular school library collection. When asked about how the library could be improved, the responses varied widely depending upon students’ interests, from “get more NEW novels” to “some teen books” to “more graphic novels and comics.”

There are many exemplary school library programs in Ontario; each of these programs has unique features, reflecting the situations of the specific schools. A key attribute of these exemplary library programs was the outstanding teaching skills and dedication of the teacher-librarians, who worked to maximize teaching and learning opportunities for students. They were strategic and resourceful in creating opportunities to alter the context within which the library program operated, in order to advance and enhance the library program. Under uncertain conditions these teacherlibrarians have developed exemplary programs that support the learning of students. Imagine what could happen if sustained support was available for all libraries.

“The single best thing about our library is our librarian, because she is always there to help us find books and always encourages us to learn with books.”

Elizabeth Lee

is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. Her research focuses on information literacy, school libraries, graphic novels and reading comprehension.

Don A. Klinger

is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. His research focuses on home and school factors affecting educational outcomes.