Against the Flow: A Continuum for Evaluating and Revitalizing School Libraries

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School libraries face challenges as they strive to meet their changing roles in today’s schools. To remain relevant in the school, the teacher librarian must enhance the presence of the library within the school’s educational mission. Our research explored exemplary elementary school library programs, and we found that context was an essential component in determining the roles and relevance of the library in the school. Context was multifaceted and the interaction among factors facilitated or hindered the implementation of exemplary practices and explained variations. A continuum of school library structures and practices was developed to evaluate current school library programs in a more flexible manner than existing standards of practice.

Introduction

The past ten years have seen an increased focus on the evaluation of school library programs. This trend reflects the increasing calls for accountability that are found throughout education in which programs are expected to define and demonstrate their value. Given these trends in education, efforts have been directed towards the development of standards for school libraries; for example, *Achieving Information Literacy: Standards for School Library Programs in Canada* recommended national standards for staffing, collection size and programming that allow individual libraries to be evaluated against these standards (Canadian School Library Association and Association for Teacher-Librarianship in Canada, 2003). Similarly, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (American Association of School Librarians & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998) describes the multiple roles of school librarians and provides principles of practice. Most recently, *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* was developed by the American Association of School Librarians (2009). Such standards provide a starting point for evaluating school libraries and their programs. However, standards by their fixed nature may not be the best tool for describing the differences among programs or for explaining the process by which school libraries develop and evolve. These standards tend to be free of context and are based on an ideal conception of a school library, one that can rarely be obtained in practice.

This paper reports on the development of a continuum of library practice that may serve as a developmental evaluation tool for supporting and revitalizing school libraries. While carrying out a study that examined exemplary school library programs in Canada (Klinger, Lee, Stephenson, Deluca, & Luu, 2009), we found that school context was a vital component in understanding the functioning of school library programs. We began our research with an effort to identify a set of standards for exemplary school library programs but quickly realized that we could not establish a linear set of attributes and then place school library programs along it. Rather, these exemplary library programs were embedded within a context that acted as both an enabler and as a constraint on the teacher librarian and the program. Context was multifaceted and composed of interacting factors that through their interactions facilitated or hindered the implementation of exemplary
practices. The continuum seeks to bring together factors that have been part of standards, or of theoretical models that examine a single aspect of school library practice such as teacher librarian and teacher collaboration, while situating these factors within a dynamic and evolving context.

**Program Evaluation and School Libraries**

Traditional models of evaluation used a summative framework and were usually intended to determine the merit, and significance of a specific program. The results of such evaluations would be used to justify the continuation or termination of a program or contribute to judgments about “best practices.” Current models of evaluation have developed frameworks that have a much broader perspective. Although, evaluators still look for indicators of merit, and significance, they have come to focus equally on improvement, as well as developmental and appreciative aspects of evaluation. These evaluation frameworks are used to support learning about how programs work, and to provide program personnel with opportunities to engage directly in systematic inquiry and data-informed decision-making (Alkin, 2004; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006).

This broader shift in approaches to program evaluation has been reflected in library research. Gordon (2009) argues for performance-based assessment of student learning as a means for librarians to gather evidence for the evaluation of the library program. Starting in the 1990s Markless & Streatfield have been investigating the development of a comprehensive approach to the evaluation of libraries in the U.K. This research has examined methods of evaluation that are appropriate for primary, middle and secondary schools, (Markless & Streatfield, 2004; Streatfield & Markless, 2004) public libraries (Markless & Streatfield, 2001), and post-secondary institutions (Markless & Streatfield, 2008). Their research shifts the evaluation focus from performance indicators that involve libraries gathering what they characterize as ‘activity completion’ data toward impact or achievement indicators data on ‘program change’ or on user ‘knowledge or skills’ (Markless & Streatfield, 2001; Streatfield & Markless, 2009). These impacts are a consequence of planned targets. Their work acknowledges the variability of libraries and they have developed principles to establish impact indicators specific to the purposes and goals of the particular library. This work encourages librarians to engage in self-evaluation through the process of creating indicators or targets rather than through externally developed standards or goals (Markless & Streatfield, 2004; Streatfield & Markless, 2004).

These newer evaluation models have arisen from the recognition that program contexts shape the needs of users and that these contexts change (Patton, 2008). Both of these conditions make it imperative that regular, if not ongoing, evaluations of programs are undertaken. With this information, effective and on-going program modifications and realignment can take place. These principles suggest a more fluid model of evaluation than that found in standards, and one that is sensitive to contextual variability.

In education, there is an expectation that schooling should support students’ learning and their attainment of educational outcomes. Within this framework, specific school programs, such as the school library, are expected to contribute to these outcomes. Research on school library programs has provided correlation evidence that the presence of a strong school library program is associated with higher levels of student achievement (Haycock, 1993; Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pinnell, 2000; 2003; Lance, & Loertscher, 2005). Nevertheless, the role of the school library is very fluid, and affected by the multi-faceted context in which it operates so it is difficult to quantify the specific role of the school library and teacher librarian in creating and supporting a learning culture in the school. Thus it is difficult to provide direct evidence. Perhaps such an expectation for the evaluation of school libraries is overly simplistic.

**Collaboration**

Oberg (2009) argued that the core premise of the school library program is integration into classroom instruction through collaboration between the teacher librarian and the teacher. Similarly, the standards and curriculum documents developed by the school library profession emphasize that collaboration is a key aspect of the teacher librarian’s role (AASL, 1998, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1982; Ontario School Library Association, 2010). School library leaders promote collaboration between the librarian and teachers (Buzzeo, 2002; Doiron & Davies, 1998; Haycock, 1993, 1998, 1999a; Hughes-Hassell & Wheelock, 2001; Kuhlthau, 1994, 1997, 2003;
Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2007; Montiel-Overall, 2005, 2008). Through these collaborative efforts, the teacher librarian becomes a vital change agent. Oberg (2009) states, “changing the organizational culture of the school constitutes the key role and goal for the school library professional and requires deep knowledge of the particular culture of the school and the complexities of the change process.” (p. 2). And as an example of the importance of context, schools that have created a well-established professional learning community have a greater degree of collaboration between teachers and teacher librarians (Haycock, 2002).

**Teaching Expertise and Leadership**

The instructional role of the librarian is dependent upon two factors: teaching expertise and leadership. Alexander (1992) found that librarians’ teaching expertise was key to their involvement in instruction (as cited in Lance et al, 2000 p. 19). Other factors that contribute to a teacher librarian having a leadership role are good interpersonal skills and the active support of the principal (Haycock, 2010, 1999b). Leadership roles will vary across schools; a strong leadership role is possible when a teacher librarian is centrally involved in curriculum across the school (Loertscher, 2006). Branch and Oberg (2001) argue a teacher librarian’s leadership role in the school aligns with their ability to collaborate in instruction with teachers. Student performance has also been linked to the instructional leadership of the teacher librarian (Hamilton-Pennell, Lance, Rodney & Hainer, 2000).

**Principals and Teachers**

School administrators and teachers in the school impact the effectiveness of the school library. The principal affects school library programs through budgetary, staffing and timetabling decisions that determine much of the school climate (Hartzell, 2003; Oberg, 2006). A principal can help create the conditions in a school that will ensure the library has an important educational role (Church, 2008; Haycock, 1999a; Henri, Hay & Oberg 2002; Howard, 2009; Sykes, 2002). Unfortunately, as Wilson and MacNeil (1998) found, most principals had little knowledge of school libraries and the majority of principal preparation programs did not have a component on the school library. Teachers’ knowledge and beliefs also influence the ability of the school library and librarian to support students’ learning and the degree of collaboration possible amongst teachers and the librarian (Brown, 2004). Ironically, the better the school library program is at achieving the integration of instruction through collaboration the more difficult it is to provide direct evidence for its unique contribution to student achievement.

Traditional methods of evaluation are ill equipped to evaluate the complex program goals and purposes that are currently espoused in the expectations for school librarians and library programs. It becomes even more difficult to conduct such evaluations given that the context in which the school library operates will likely impact the effectiveness of the school library. Current conceptions of evaluation recognize that educational programs operate within a complex interactive system. While the determination of worth and merit is still important, formative and developmental models of evaluation explore the potential of a program, and the conditions that either hinder or support the attainment of that potential. Through our study of exemplary school libraries, we created a continuum for evaluating school libraries (Klinger, Lee, Stephenson, Deluca, & Luu, 2009). We believe the continuum described below can play an important evaluative function that could help school librarians and school library programs meet their potential, and support teaching and learning in our schools.

**Method**

Our research was conducted in eight elementary schools (serving children from age five to twelve) located in southern Ontario that were identified by the Ontario Library Association (OLA) as having exemplary school library programs. The schools were from three public boards and one public Catholic board (all are equally funded by the province), representing a large city, a mid-sized city, suburban, and semi-rural regions. We completed detailed case studies in two schools that included observations of the library program during daily operations, and interviews with the teacher librarians, the school administrators, library volunteers, and between two and four teachers who had previously worked collaboratively with the teacher librarian. We also conducted surveys with students. Six smaller case studies omitted the teacher librarian observations from the data collection, but included the interviews and student surveys. The observations were supported
by field notes and were used to create narratives that exemplified key practices in the two detailed cases. Our analyses for this research were based on the observations and interviews. Interview data were transcribed and analysed by the research team. Interview data were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet and coded qualitatively according to ideas and principles that emerged from these data. Our goal was to identify common and unique themes that either brought together or separated these exemplary library programs. Through these case studies we were able to develop a continuum of school library programs. Our findings enabled us to place school library programs along this continuum based on the roles and responsibilities of the school librarians, the functioning of the school libraries, and the impact of the school context on the school library.

Results

Key Features of the School Library Continuum

The school libraries we observed in our research functioned in very different ways and served different roles within the schools. In analyzing these differences it became clear that a multitude of factors existed in each school that created a unique context for each library program that resulted in a set of unique library programs. Yet we found three consistent features in each of the exemplary school library programs that appeared central to the effective functioning of these libraries. These were the school context, teacher librarians who focused on teaching, and teacher librarians who were agents of change.

School context.

Central to our research was the identification of the important role that school context has in shaping the school library program. School context incorporated factors such as, administrative support at the school and board level, school culture, teacher expertise and experience, funding, history of the school library, school climate, professional knowledge of the librarian and tech/volunteer support in the library. These factors interacted amongst each other and may have both direct and indirect effects upon the implementation of an exemplary library program. For example, collaboration between the teacher librarian and teachers to jointly plan and carry out teaching is often described as an example of exemplary practice. It is sometimes held up as the ideal in the professional literature or in standards. However, teachers’ expertise and experience interacts with school culture and school history to create an environment that is to a greater or lesser degree open to such collaborations. A program with extensive collaboration between the school librarian and teachers may be exemplary but so may a program in which the teacher librarian is unable to collaborate with teachers but is able to teach independently. New teachers who lack experience may not know the benefits of, or be open to, collaboration. This is where we began to see how the three features also interact. For example, the ability for the teacher librarian to be an agent for change, the third defining feature of exemplary library programs, can alter the current school context and lead to future or increased collaborations with teachers in the school. The librarian can demonstrate the benefits of collaboration to new teachers; this makes the program an exemplary one even though the amount of collaboration may currently be low.

A focus on teaching.

Exemplary school library programs were ones in which the focus of the program was on teaching students. The teacher librarian sought to maximize the amount of time devoted to teaching within each specific school context. We identified exemplary programs that differed substantially on the amount and form of teaching that the teacher librarian completed. It became very clear to us that a simple quantitative judgment based upon the amount of teaching or form of teaching was not sufficient. Doing so ignores the contextual factors that shape the program and that may limit the form of instruction.

The librarian as change agent.

The third defining feature of exemplary school library programs was that the teacher librarian continuously worked to change the context. This was a purposeful effort on the part of the librarian to shift the balance amongst the factors that made up the context to enable more teaching. These teacher librarians were active agents of change, working to build connections with
classroom teachers, school administrators and the broader community. Thus the knowledge, expertise, experience and communication skills of the librarian were vitally important in creating the conditions for this evolution of context to occur. Ultimately, the degree and the rate of contextual change was the result of an interaction between the existing context and the change efforts of the librarian.

The Continuum of Exemplary Library Programs

The four discrete levels of the continuum described below help to explain the variability of exemplary school library programs that we observed. Higher levels 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, a school library program requires a teacher librarian who is a change agent, striving to alter both the context and the program. Programs at Level 1 face the greatest number of limitations due to the school context and the greatest resistance (or lack of knowledge) to accepting the educational role of the school library. Subsequent levels have fewer contextual limitations. A school library operating at Level 3 will differ from one in Level 2 because there is greater support for the educational role of the library program. However, it is important to recognize that a school library program may be at different levels for different library characteristics. For example, a school may be at a Level 2 with respect to its financial supports but be functioning at a Level 3 in its ability to integrate within the school culture (See Table 1). Although these levels help to describe such variation, we also recognize that there is variation within each level and that the distinctions between levels are provided for the purposes of description rather than clear delineation.

Applying the Continuum

Each school library program needs to be evaluated individually as the context within which each occurs is unique and dynamic. The single best criterion for evaluating a library program is, given the context, do the choices that have been made serve to maximize the time spent teaching by the teacher librarian.

Level 1 school library programs.

School library programs at Level 1 operate within a context that place many constraints on the teacher librarian and the school library program. This context may be due to financial constraints and is marked by a general lack of teacher and administrator support. Often, these programs have partial (i.e., part-time) teacher librarian positions resulting in limited programming. The teacher librarian may have to work in more than one school or in more than one position within a school, decreasing the connection between the teacher librarian and classroom teachers and students. Such part-time positions make the role of the librarian difficult. Flexible open scheduling is difficult or even impossible to maintain and severely limits the instructional time that the teacher librarian can provide. In these contexts, the librarian may have greater responsibility to provide prep coverage and basic library functions rather than instructional purposes.

The current or historical school board policies may also contribute to a disabling context where there is little expectation for the school library to be staffed by a trained teacher librarian. In addition, librarians operating within this context have little consultant support or professional development opportunities. Professional development support for school library programs may be unavailable at the board level. Teachers working within a Level 1 school context frequently have limited experience with a well-staffed library. This lack of experience makes integration of the library program more difficult as teachers are reluctant to use the library and to partner with the teacher librarian.
Table 1: Exemplary School Library Program Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library’s role in school</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library’s role in school</td>
<td>Operates within school culture</td>
<td>Partnerships are building</td>
<td>Library is central to learning</td>
<td>Level 3 features plus systematic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-librarian’s role in school</td>
<td>Seen as a secondary resource</td>
<td>Library is an important resource</td>
<td>Equal partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Library has peripheral support role</td>
<td>Opportunities for teaching (but viewed as add-ons)</td>
<td>Central role in instruction</td>
<td>Collaborative teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parallel or independent teaching</td>
<td>Cooperative teaching</td>
<td>Established a new culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Librarian capitalizes on administrative and teacher decisions</td>
<td>Actively changing culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Library “skills” some teaching is unconnected to classroom instruction</td>
<td>Curriculum and library instruction coordinated</td>
<td>Integration of classroom and library instruction</td>
<td>Innovative, opportunistic: Finds solutions to barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Library viewed as peripheral</td>
<td>Library valued but not seen as central to school’s purpose</td>
<td>Seen as central to school’s purpose</td>
<td>Shared understanding across staff and system (board) of library role (as defined in level 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision making about the library may not involve the librarian</td>
<td>Pro-active in support of the library</td>
<td>System wide valuing and support for library programs (e.g., board level consultant)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shared decision making</td>
<td>PD support for librarians,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Librarian involved in school leadership</td>
<td>Librarians are required to have specialization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands &amp; values the instructional role of librarian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Scheduling supports instructional role of librarian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Library finance decided by administration. Regular allocation</td>
<td>Administration provides additional funding on occasion</td>
<td>Methods to address financial constraints as a regular part of school planning</td>
<td>Finances on a firm foundation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The principals and teachers in the schools we classified as having Level 1 exemplary school libraries spoke enthusiastically about the teacher librarian and the school library. However, they held a traditional view of the school library program as a source of materials. This limited understanding of the possibilities the library offered for teaching meant the teacher librarian’s primary role was one of support. For example, the teacher librarian providing prep coverage or other specific services, such as information technology or research skills instruction.

While primarily working in a support role, teacher librarians in exemplary Level 1 library programs continually work to develop partnerships that enable them to be more directly involved in instruction. These teacher librarians recognized the constraints under which they were operating and were working to increase their role in the school. As one teacher librarian noted, “Sometimes I have to go out and hunt people down.” They also initiate procedures that freed more of their time for teaching and began to work more directly with teachers. As one teacher librarian, working part-time in a school, commented, “The kids are all trained on book exchange so when I’m not here the classes come in.” The success of such efforts requires the willingness of teachers to move beyond their current instructional patterns and roles. The teacher librarian’s efforts to implement change are often difficult and may encounter resistance. Teachers with little experience coordinating their teaching with another teacher, in this case the librarian perceive partnerships as additional, time-consuming work. The successful teacher librarian working within a Level 1 context needs to look for ways to engage the teachers with the library program, highlighting the various roles the school library could serve in support of teachers’ instruction while building an ongoing supportive working relationship. One Grade 5 teacher admitted, “I’m not as computer literate as I’d like to be. I’m very grateful to have a librarian that is computer literate.”

Throughout their efforts to maintain, build and change their library program, these teacher librarians needed to be positive and accommodating. Teachers and principals made a point of commenting on the librarian’s willingness to accommodate teachers and school programs. The teacher librarian looked for opportunities to be a positive influence in the school, for example, helping teachers grapple with curriculum changes. One Grade 5 teacher observed, the teacher librarian in the school “does a good job of keeping up-to-date with the new initiatives from the Ministry, he’ll find us books to use, mentor text for us to use in the classroom and then any way he can help us with assistive technology.” Effective teacher librarians continually searched for initiatives and programs that would benefit the students in the school and raise students’ and teachers’ awareness of the school library and enhance the profile of the school library.

**Level 2 school library programs.**

Library programs functioning at Level 2 are situated within a less constraining school context compared with those at Level 1. These libraries have an important and ongoing role, supporting classroom teachers and students’ learning but are not viewed as central to achieving the school’s purpose. Exemplary Level 2 library programs benefit from greater administrative support. Principals in these schools may hold a broader view of the role of the library within the school culture and their active support of the library influences how the library is viewed and used by other teachers. As a teacher librarian commented, “… one of the things the principal and I talked about as a strategy was finding the teachers, you know who would be on board.” Funding for libraries within the Level 2 context is often unstable from year-to-year with administrators providing partial funding, for a period of time. This additional funding may provide prep coverage so that the librarian can focus more time on instruction and planning. Given the increased funding support, librarians within the Level 2 context have more time to develop partnerships with classroom teachers and take on a larger instructional role.

Similar to exemplary Level 1 school library programs, the teacher librarians we observed working within a Level 2 context actively tried to change the context to enhance the role of the library within the school. A distinguishing characteristic of Level 2 school libraries is an increased emphasis on integrating instruction. This is likely the result of many factors within the context. The school culture is more collaborative, leading teachers to be more open to working cooperatively with the teacher librarian. We certainly observed that the instructional cooperation between classroom teachers and librarians was more apparent than in Level 1. This move to more integration is an ongoing process that takes time and effort. As one teacher librarian commented “With total support from the administration my biggest challenge was changing the way the library was used.”
The increased time that the librarian could devote to teaching is an important factor that helps teachers and administrators understand how the school library program can contribute to learning. It shifts the ways in which the library is used, and changes the working relationships between teachers and the teacher librarian.

Teacher librarians in exemplary level 2 school library programs focus on promoting the library program by encouraging teachers to use the library and partner with the librarian for instructional purposes. “She’s constantly bringing the library to us…it’s a very proactive type of relationship and that makes it much easier for us to make better use of the library.” Through such a proactive approach, teachers within the school become more confident in using the school library and are more willing to share teaching with the librarian. The resulting shift enables the teacher librarian to have greater teaching responsibilities within a developing integrative instructional approach. “I have really seen a different attitude because initially the teachers who were reluctant, it was yeah this was great but when can we book out research skills and book exchange, but I haven’t had anyone ask me this year.” The teacher librarian actively changes the school culture and teachers generally acknowledge the important educative role of the teacher librarian. “I can’t even imagine a literacy program without the support of your library and your librarian because the two can’t ever be separated.” This is in part due to the librarian’s flexibility in supporting teachers’ instructional needs. “I think she’s the key, she’ll come in and do anything; she’s teaching in Math right now.”

**Level 3 school library programs.**

Exemplary Level 3 school library programs have a primary focus on student learning. At this level, the library is the centre of the school – a hub for learning that extends into all areas of the school. As one librarian stated, “The library is the centre of all action...where teachers and students start their day and travel to the library during the day and end their day...all the resources are used endlessly.” The teacher librarian working within this context does much more than manage books and resources or provide prep coverage. These librarians make the library the heart of the school and seize on every opportunity to teach in an engaging fashion, bringing an enthusiasm that draws students and staff into the library. Principals and classroom teachers support this vision of the library as a place for learning and teaching.

In our research, we noted that Level 3 school library programs had strong administrative support. These administrators recognize the critical role of the library, and consider the teacher librarian as a key teaching member of their staff and part of the school leadership team. The library is integral to the schools’ mission. These school library programs are highly supported, often through extra funding, perhaps through the funding of additional librarian time beyond the minimum prep allocation, and extra funding for resources. These principals appear to prioritize funding for library services. For instance, some Level 3 programs we observed had a full-time position even though the size of the schools required only a .5 position. The respective principals used internal school budget allocations to fund the difference. The larger amount of teacher librarian time results in higher quality instruction for students and more collaborative teaching opportunities, creating learning units that integrated knowledge and skills across the curriculum.

Teacher librarians view the additional funding for librarian time as validation from the principal of the value of the library program. My value as a teacher librarian and the value of the library will start to be diminished (if the time is cut back to .5) because that role is simply, she’s just going to take my class and I’ll get my prep and that’s all it is. And vice versa, perhaps if I’m only deemed worthy of half-time partnering period that sends a pretty strong message to the staff that it’s not a worthy enough program, it’s not beneficial to the students and to the staff, it’s not making any difference to the children’s education, all of those hidden messages would be there.

Short of board level cuts, the teacher librarian’s position seems to be secure within the Level 3 school context. There are also board level supports in the form of consultants, and ongoing professional development opportunities for level 3 school library programs. Key to an exemplary library program at Level 3 is the librarian’s ability to be an effective teacher, providing educational support and leadership through partnering and collaboration while finding opportunities for integration and cross-curricular connections. Collaboration between classroom
teachers and teacher librarians is a critical activity within Level 3 programs. As an example, one librarian gave this view of her role: “I think it is empowering staff and students. It is not my library, it is not my computer, it is not my collection, it is ours.” The teacher librarians we observed in these schools had worked very hard over time to build teachers’ awareness of the benefits of collaboration with the librarian, and had successfully demonstrated these benefits to the staff. They provided ever-changing support to teachers and had successfully reached the point where they were participating in true collaborative teaching with classroom teachers in the school. Exemplary Level 3 programs have teacher librarians who seize on every opportunity to teach in an engaging fashion and bring an enthusiasm to this that draws students and staff into the library. Hence the teacher librarian is a key provider of instruction in the school. The librarians that we observed continued to strive to change their library program, through self-evaluation and critical reflection on library-related instructional activities. They were models of life-long learning, seeking out learning opportunities in areas that were new to them and then transferred this knowledge back to the library to enhance their program. Teacher librarians in Level 3 programs are highly engaged in their schools, and continually seek new challenges and opportunities for themselves and for the program.

I wanted to show the staff that there was some value in my job and one of our school initiatives is literacy so I coupled those two things together and created a program that would support both, what I call a literacy-based drama program. I took a full year of drama training offered through the drama department after school...previous to that I had no experience with drama. I taught lessons and I reported on drama expectations that I gave to teachers for the report cards and that was a huge success. I was able to tie it to our school initiatives and I was able to support our lower level students and engage them and I was giving teachers something of value to them, which is covering a piece of the curriculum.

This high level of engagement is also apparent in the diverse range of library programs that can exist in such libraries, and the teacher librarians’ wider involvement in their schools, serving on grade level and administrative teams. These teacher librarians have a positive outlook on students and staff, and speak with real appreciation about the students. They recognize the challenges they face in their schools and the library’s role within it, but interpret these as opportunities not problems.

Level 3 library programs are innovative. Moreover, these innovations seamlessly embed learning expectations within ongoing activities or events in the school. For example, an after-school Tamagochi club enabled children to bring in their own Tamagochi and play with them in the club.

I saw the educational potential of them because it’s interesting that in many schools they are banned. You are not allowed to because the kids play with it during class. I spoke with my principal before forming this club. My office was the Tamagochi daycare...then we would play.... In terms of (student) learning, it was as much the learning skills and the collaborative skills.

This librarian had turned a problem in the school into an opportunity for learning. Exemplary teacher librarians recognize the importance of building relationships with students and staff and create opportunities for this to happen. They know they need to work with different staff members in a flexible manner to fit with each teacher’s comfort level. These teacher librarians see their role as one of accommodating the needs of teachers in a variety of ways and work to shift the relationship over time. "I think what I really try to do is listen to the teachers and I try to figure out how I can best support them."

One of the key attributes that contribute to the excellence of these library programs is the exemplary teaching skill of the teacher librarians, coupled with their positive enjoyment in teaching students. These teacher librarians have excellent classroom management techniques with the consequence that not a moment is wasted; students are actively engaged in learning and the lessons flow efficiently. This is due in part to the careful planning that goes into the lessons and the advanced preparation. Lastly, Level 3 library programs are characterized by the efforts of the librarian to bring outside resources and programs into the library to improve learning opportunities for the students.

Level 4 school library programs.
We believe that exemplary Level 4 school library programs represent the ideal. Level 4 programs are Level 3 programs that have systematic administrative support at the school, school board and provincial levels, both in funding and policy. In our research, we were unable to categorize any programs as functioning at Level 4 because, unfortunately, school libraries in Ontario receive intermittent support in funding and staffing. Even the exemplary teacher librarians with programs that were models of instructional integration that we observed always faced the possibility that the library position could be cut. Their current support was at the discretion of the principal and board policy. The impermanence of these library programs meant that no library program could be considered to be at Level 4. This lack of systematic support hinders the ongoing development and growth of library programs and it is largely due to the outstanding professionalism of librarians that we were able to observe a number of Level 3 programs. All too often, school library programs are supported for a time, and then slowly disappear, and then have to be recreated years later. The ad hoc approach to the role of school libraries in education from the three levels of administration (school, board and provincial) results in hard-won expertise and knowledge vanishing from the educational system.

**Key Contextual Factors**

**Funding**
Not surprisingly, funding is a key factor in creating a specific context. It determines the librarian's appointment and thus the amount of time a teacher librarian can devote to teaching. It is likely the biggest challenge across all levels of the continuum. Due to the fixed costs associated with classroom teachers and building operations, the most common method to address issues of cost reduction has been through cuts to student support services. School libraries have been particularly vulnerable to such funding cuts.

**Policy**
In Ontario, where our study took place, there is no provincial policy to ensure all schools have fully functioning libraries. Funding for librarians is provided on a per pupil basis and small schools are much less likely to have teacher librarians. Some school boards make decisions to support school libraries, while others leave such decisions to principals. Many boards with a history of cutting teacher librarian positions have created a context in which principals and teachers have less experience using school libraries. Currently, one third of the elementary schools in Ontario do not have a teacher librarian (People for Education, 2009).

**Principals**
The support of the elementary school principal is vital to both the existence of the school library and to the creation of exemplary school library programs. The support of the principal is demonstrated through sufficient operating, maintenance and renewal funds to the library, allotting teaching/partnership time to the teacher librarian, protecting the teacher librarian from delivering excessive amounts of preparation time and, perhaps most significantly, by clearly acknowledging the teacher librarian’s leadership role amongst the teachers in the school. Principals who understand the impact of exemplary school library programs on student learning are vital, yet when many elementary schools do not have a librarian, principals may lack sufficient experience with library programs to have an understanding of how well supported library programs can contribute to the school’s educational goals.

**School history**
The low level of comprehensive library programs in elementary schools creates a situation in which principals and teachers lack experience and knowledge of school library programs. This results in teachers not having the experience of collaborating for student instruction with a teacher librarian. These two factors result in teacher librarians being under-utilized instructionally and needing to continually justify their place in education.
Discussion

Developing a continuum that has context as a frame allowed us to evaluate in an equivalent manner school library programs that differed substantially in the form of their practice. The extent to which a teacher librarian is able to teach students, especially through collaboration, the indicator of exemplary practice, is fostered or limited by the school context in which the library operated. Context is dynamic and evolves through the change efforts of the teacher librarian. In this way programs that are at Level 1 or 2 on the continuum can still be characterized as exemplary although they might be characterized as non-exemplary if a more generic set of standards were applied. For example, in the Level 1 and 2 library programs that we observed teacher librarians struggled to integrate library instruction such as information literacy into the curriculum. Nonetheless, these programs are not static or poorly functioning. Rather, the teacher librarian maximizes teaching to the extent possible and is a change agent who actively seeks to alter the context. Exemplary school library programs are evolving, a facet that cannot be captured through standards that tend to focus on specific features rather than growth and change. By accounting for context the continuum provides an evaluation framework that recognizes the interactive and evolving nature of exemplary school library programs.

The continuum offers the potential for several forms of evaluation. Currently, the self-evaluation of the library program by teacher librarians is the norm in Ontario’s schools. The continuum offers a framework that formally recognizes the variability found amongst schools and school libraries. Presently, principals use teacher evaluation tools when evaluating the teacher librarian. The continuum provides an evaluation framework that is specific to the library, enabling principals to more fairly evaluate the functioning of the school library. Additionally, the continuum could be employed by board level staff to develop a composite profile of library programs across the system. Such a composite profile would allow individual teacher librarians to compare their school’s profile to others for establishing future goals.

Our future research with the continuum may examine how teacher librarians use it as a tool for joint problem-solving. Could teams of teacher librarians’ use it as an analytic tool to collaborate on examining each other’s programs? This would resolve the common problem and expectation for the teacher librarian or principal to evaluate their library program in isolation. The recognition of the role of context the continuum creates a less judgmental model than a typical standards-based evaluation. This may enable teacher librarians to be more open to evaluation by fellow librarians. A joint problem-solving approach would involve teacher librarians developing profiles of each library. Key to these profiles would be the identification and description of the contextual factors that led to the similarities and differences across the school library profiles. Through a process of collaborative problem-solving and sharing of professional knowledge there is the potential to arrive at solutions that would promote progress in each individual school library program.

The continuum presented here offers an alternative to the use of standards for evaluating school library programs. Standards by their nature involve a hierarchy and leave the possibility open of being applied in a rigid manner in evaluation. The continuum provides a tool that recognizes and incorporates context as a determining factor, and allows for the recognition of exemplary programs and practice through growth and change. This permits evaluators to take a developmental perspective in evaluating school library programs. Accounting for context enables evaluations to be more nuanced and incorporate a positive view of the diversity of school library programs. This form of evaluation serves the goal of having an evaluation that is functional rather than judgmental, thereby supporting the potential development of the school library program.

The continuum recognizes the importance of teacher librarian’s ability to collaborate with teachers and their instructional role. Certainly, the description of the levels of collaboration between the teacher librarian and teacher is similar to how this aspect of the teacher librarian’s role is described in standards. However, the continuum, by recognizing the determining role of context, removes the association of a specific form of collaboration e.g., partnering as being better or worse than another form; unlike standards that frequently carry a judgmental hierarchy. In the continuum this key role of the teacher librarian is evaluated in a dynamic manner that recognizes a specific form of practice may not be ideal but, given the context, it is exemplary.
References


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