

The Teacher-Librarian in Structural Innovation

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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What Is Structural Innovation?

In an effort to improve student achievement, Regina Public Schools undertook an initiative called Structural Innovation. In the 2008 – 2009 school year, two working groups, one focused on Elementary schools and the other on High Schools, were formed to study structural innovation. These groups contained school-based educators from a variety of roles who read extensively and visited successful schools to identify practices to target in our schools. The four areas identified are:

- Teacher collaboration
- Flexible teaching arrangements and flexible grouping
- Interdisciplinary and inquiry-based teaching and learning
- Inclusive practices

All schools were then challenged to design a plan appropriate to their students and school focusing on these four areas and submit this for consideration to become a demonstration school for the 2009 – 2010 school year. From among the applicants, fourteen schools were selected and are currently implementing their innovative plan in their respective schools. A general explanation of structural innovation in Regina Public Schools is found at http://www.rbe.sk.ca/docs/structural_innovation_innovative_learning_article.pdf.

The specific plans for each demonstration school are linked to the following Website:

<http://www.rbe.sk.ca/index.asp?id=structuralinnovationinRPS>.

How Is The Teacher-Librarian Role Affected?

Like all staff within these demonstration schools, the teacher librarian role has been greatly impacted. In October, teacher librarians in these schools were asked how structural innovation has affected their role in positive ways and what challenges have been created by the changes. Although early in the school year, their candid comments show trends already developing.

Role Combination

- Often, the role of the teacher librarian is combined with other positions in these Structural Innovation schools. For example, one of the teacher librarians who responded to the survey is vice principal and teacher librarian. Another has combined the roles of teacher librarian and learning resource teacher. In a third example, the teacher librarian has also become a team leader to a group of teachers focusing on literacy with grade nine students. These educators accomplish a huge variety of tasks in a day.

- “My role is to lead the innovation project, lead our learning agenda and specifically support the Literacy, Numeracy and Aboriginal goals....I collaborate with teachers, lead all pre and post assessments, VAA [value added assessments] and Teacher Moderation....The next phase of my role will be specific teacher collaboration and team-teaching with classroom teachers in Literacy and Numeracy. I will also be part of an Intervention First team that will look at Tier One and Two interventions in classrooms through classroom observations and team meetings.” (Fladager)
- A typical day for the teacher librarian/learning resource teacher will have her “leading reading groups, working with a student who has a learning disability, working with a student who is new to French Immersion, helping with the grade 5 math room where there are students with specific needs, teaching an advanced reading group, and meeting with other members of the school team.” (Revet) One day in a five day cycle, she says, I work “with specific students and assist in some book exchange periods. I teach specific information skills and/or introduce/read books to the younger grades.”
- “Being leader for the grade nine literacy team is a wonderful extension of my teacher librarian role. I coordinate reading strategy lessons and reading materials for a group of 180 grade nine students, seven teachers and one teaching assistant. Our group of staff has time built into the schedule to meet, discuss student needs, and plan strategies. This collaboration means that the workload is shared and we enjoy the company and support of our colleagues daily.” (Arnstead)

Role Enhancement

The teacher-librarians who responded, although challenged by their expanded roles, are enjoying them.

- “Perhaps SI [structural innovation] has enlarged our role, but this makes things more interesting.” (Steele)
- “I have been challenged to work as a leader from K-8 in literacy, numeracy and Aboriginal content when I am not always comfortable doing so.”(Fladager)
- “My jobs as TL [teacher librarian] and LRT [learning resource teacher] have fused together this year. I work collaboratively with both primary and senior teams to acquire resources, help plan units (centers, for example) team-teach, problem solve for specific students, help with technology, etc. I am also teaching information skills more deliberately instead of ‘when the need presents itself’ since I am rarely in the library.” (Revet)
- “I was involved in the administration of the pre-reading assessments for all the grade nine students. We have scored them collaboratively through a process of teacher moderation. I will now meet with the Literacy and Numeracy consultant to study the data and plan some instruction to meet student needs. I am learning so much through this process.” (Arnstead)

Role Definition

One of the teacher librarians commented that in order to get things off to a positive start, he outlined what his role would be under structural innovation at the first staff meeting of the year and made classroom visits to make students aware also. (Fladager) Another of the respondents noted that communication with parents is essential so they understand how structural innovation affects their young people's education. (Revet)

What Demands Are Placed On Library Resources?

All of the respondents recognized that the structural innovations in their schools place huge demands on the resources in their libraries.

- “As a TL, I am placing my emphasis on building our collection of non-fiction resources and Aboriginal content to be integrated in the balanced literacy blocks that each classroom has each day for two hours. I am also specifically supporting our Read to Self, Read to Someone, Teacher Read Aloud, Good Fit Books and Writer’s Workshop initiatives.” (Fladager)
- “We clearly do not have enough resources. Specifically our non-fiction section which does not have appropriately leveled resources for all of our readers. We also need far more Aboriginal content. In addition, teachers want and need large classroom libraries that are difficult to build quickly.... We also clearly do not have the resources and technology we need to be doing inquiry based instruction in a deep and meaningful way.” (Fladager)
- “Finding the necessary resources in French to support inquiry learning is difficult and expensive. My budget will not suffice since our non-fiction collection is old and needs replacing.” (Revet)
- “Our fiction collection is stretched to the maximum to supply reading material to 180 grade nine students who read daily for half an hour as well as to the other 620 students at my high school. We need to purchase multiple copies of popular books and the first volume in series.” (Arnstead)
- “It is difficult to meet the needs of our rapidly growing group of EAL (English as an additional language) students with teenage appropriate materials written at a reading level they can manage.” (Arnstead)
- “Our literacy time and resources need to be appropriately leveled, strategy specific, reading stamina building and content area rich. It is AWESOME to watch teachers teaching HOW to select good fit books and having the students know what they need and will use these books for real purposes....I love hearing the common language from both teachers and students as they select their books!” (Fladager)

How Are Library Scheduling And Procedures Affected?

These busy teacher librarians commented that the flexible scheduling of the library space can be difficult and that some procedures have had to change in order to accommodate structural innovation.

- “Trying to change the ... timetable for the library so it is freed up as a place for research may take some time” (Steele)
- “The Learning Commons in our school has traditionally been an instructional hub as well as a professional development centre” (Hart)
- “...we are building our classroom libraries....The students have much more material out of the library at one time. Teachers have all the material signed out to them instead of the students. Thus they do not take the books home, the teacher is responsible for them and the class can do mini-book exchanges within their class anytime they wish.” (Fladager)
- “The library is also used as the home base for our Literacy and Numeracy facilitator as well as a classroom breakout space for one of our clusters making it difficult to access on a totally flexible basis.” (Fladager)
- “Because I am involved with the grade nine literacy program in period one, I am never available to work with other classes at that time. My part time resource centre assistance time had to be increased so she could cover the times for me when I am now in class.” (Arnstead)
- “Because the structural innovation in our high school has used block scheduling for the grade nines, the other grade schedules have become less flexible too. All the grade twelve English classes are forced into periods four and five which creates huge pressure for the library and for my instructional time in the afternoons.” (Arnstead)
- “Our non-fiction collection cannot possibly meet the demand for resources needed by so many students doing research at the same time. As a result, I am finding teachers much more open to having me show students our online databases and internet searching skills than they were in years passed.” (Arnstead)

What Skills Do Teacher Librarians Need?

The demands of structural innovation require the skills teacher librarians are trained in and emphasize the continuing need for professional development in these areas. There is a very real and immediate need in the schools for the skills teacher librarians have. Teachers require help to implement interdisciplinary and inquiry based learning and are turning to teacher librarians for assistance. The intensive reading programs implemented in many of the schools require the teacher librarians' knowledge of appropriate reading materials, skill in teaching reading strategies and expertise in literacy learning. Collaborating with other educators is a complex skill to develop. Teacher librarians need to seek and acquire appropriate literacy and curricular resources. They require the ability to help students with information literacy and multimedia. Teacher librarians need to be knowledgeable in the use and integration of all forms of technology to support teaching and learning.

- “...the direction of structural innovations has, to some extent, just formalized what we have been attempting to do over the past several years.” (Hart)
- “I have some knowledge that younger teachers may not have—because of my experience and education. I feel that I need to continue to ‘put myself forward’ because I have skills and knowledge that fit into our plans to be innovative—especially in the area of Inquiry-based Learning” (Steele)
- “I have had to do lots of research myself and tap into the expertise of others around me.” (Fladager)
- “Taking leadership involves risk that others will not be open to it, so a person has to believe in herself.” (Steele)
- “The emphasis on collaboration has a positive impact for teacher librarians who have always understood collaboration as a key part of their role.” (Steele) “...I have skills and knowledge that fit into our plans to be innovative – especially in the area of Inquiry-based Learning.” (Steele)
- “Change is difficult for a lot of people who haven’t had to step out of their comfort zone, so those of us who have had to change a lot need to help others adapt.” (Steele)

What Are The Time Constraints?

A common challenge mentioned by the responding teacher librarians is the need for time to collaborate. Some structural innovation schools have tried to build professional learning communities and time for collaboration into the schedule. In some schools, teachers want to work with the teacher librarian but she simply does not have time left during the school day. Reduction of teacher librarian time over the years to meet budget constraints means that now teacher librarians do not have enough time to fulfill their role. Because library management tasks like collection development, resource selection, managing volunteers, and balancing accounts are less visible tasks and don’t always involve direct student contact, sufficient time to handle them has not been allocated in some structural innovation schools. When the survey was done only two months into the school year, the impact of this on the library and the teacher librarian may not yet have become evident. But this will definitely need consideration in the long term.

- Time is a challenge since I would like to be in the studios [classrooms] more. Being the TL[teacher librarian}, LRT [learning resource teacher], attending meetings for both roles and stepping in as acting principal when our principal is away tends to fill up my schedule. (Revet)
- “Teachers in the senior pods [grades] would like to work collaboratively with me but my time as TL is limited since the bulk of my time (60%) is dedicated to my learning resource role.” (Revet)

Conclusion

Structural innovation in Regina Public Schools is a work in progress. The demonstration schools are making adjustments to their programs as they experiment with what works and what doesn't. Many other non-demonstration schools are also trying new ways to reach and teach the young people they serve. Teacher librarians are in the middle and at the forefront of the changes that are occurring. These are exciting, challenging times for teacher librarians. The final words are theirs:

- “I have become a true learning leader in my school with the time to collaborate, team teach and flexibly respond to staff and student needs.” (Fladager)
- “Students and staff members alike have commented to me that students seem so engaged in what they are reading and that having a daily, extended period of reading each day for these teenagers is like a gift.” (Arnstead)
- “Structural innovation has changed our staff's thinking from ‘my kids’ to ‘our kids’. There is much more dialogue about the students themselves and many more people are willing to differentiate so that all students experience success...I like how we are taking ownership of the school population as a whole. Flexible working groups (both students and teachers) are encouraging better discussion and collaboration.” (Revet)
- “Generosity is required in SI [structural innovation].” (Steele)
- “This is an exciting time and we are working to continue to meet the needs of all of our students using well-established, as well as innovative, structures and teaching and learning practices.” (Hart)
- “Structural innovation is both an exciting and stressful time.” (Revet)

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