

# Instructional Team Coaches: An evolution of the role of teacher librarian

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Prairie Valley School Division (PVSD) is now in its second year of implementing the role of instructional team coaches (ITCs). This position is a hybrid of sorts, between a teacher librarian and a literacy coach, with a focus on literacy and instructional leadership. When I talk about the work we are doing, I am often asked two questions: How did we end up where we are in this journey? How is this role different from that of a more traditional teacher librarian? I will do my best to answer both of those questions and to explain how this shift has helped us to keep our library professionals an important piece of the literacy plans in our schools.

Collaboration with teachers and support of literacy within the school are key aspects to the role of teacher librarian. In my first years as Library Consultant with PVSD, I was asking teacher librarians to focus their long-range planning on deeper collaborations and really targeting with administration, how they were going to strategically support their schools' literacy goals. The English Language Arts Consultant was discussing a framework to bring literacy coaches into the division. The more we discussed the two roles, that of literacy coach and the emphasis of teacher librarians on literacy support and collaboration, the more we realized the two were very closely aligned. Also, we already had teacher librarians in every school which meant no extra funding would need to be considered in terms of staffing.

As we are seeing more and more in our province, the cuts to teacher librarians are a real concern. This evolution of the role, if we did it right, was also a way to maintain our library programs and keep the position viable, albeit in a new way. We worked through what this idea would involve, what professional development would look like over the next three years, and how this role would impact our literacy plans as a division. It was approved, and we introduced the concept to our teacher librarians in May 2016. We discussed the idea of a name change with our teacher librarians, one that would reflect their new role. A few were hesitant to drop “library” from their title, but most thought it was necessary as many teachers still viewed them as teacher librarians of the distant past who were primarily the keepers of books. They liked the word “coach” as it was reflective of a team working together. The rest, as they say, is history!

How is this hybrid different from the role of teacher librarian? In addition to library management, the position of teacher librarian, at least the way it was being actualized in PVSD, often focused on collaborations centred on specific units of study and the teacher librarian taking groups of students to work with one-on-one based on discussions with the teacher. This is where the change is most significant. The shift has moved to the support of teachers, in a coaching role. Our ITCs collaborate with teachers to work on best instructional practice, particularly in literacy. They will also work as a team with teachers to develop strategies for differentiation and to use all forms of data to plan for responsive instruction. Teachers who may not be trained in literacy instruction or are new to the profession now have someone with whom to collaborate and develop their craft.

ITCs are also working at becoming lead learners with the school community. Although, in my experience, many teacher librarians already naturally assume this role. The relationship between the ITC and administrator is important, and they are working together with their school staffs toward their literacy goals. Supporting teachers with resources is still part of the role as well. Just as they were as teacher librarians, they remain the “resource experts” and spend some of their time finding, curating or acquiring resources to help meet the needs of teachers.

Instructional team coaches are still responsible for managing the library. They order materials, arrange library schedules, plan special events and incentives and facilitate the overall running of the library. At certain times of the year, this is a bigger responsibility than others, but in general, they set aside a small amount of time each week. We are very fortunate to still have some library assistant support at each school to help with library management tasks such as book returns, labelling and taping, book sign outs, etc. This allows the majority of ITC time to be used with teachers, with only a small portion needed for management.

Is this sounding overwhelming yet? We have several processes in place to help make this happen. Our division has provided us with two face-to-face professional development days per year with the entire group which we use to help our coaches grow in their positions. We run at least two professional book clubs per year as well as regular, monthly online meetings and in-person support where needed. We have 25 coaches in total, 8 of which are itinerant with either two or three schools.

We did an activity in one of our first ITC professional development days where the coaches completed a Venn Diagram with the teacher librarian role on one side and the

instructional team coach on the other. Many of the characteristics filled the overlapping middle. Several comments made that day were that this was not that drastically different from what we were already doing, but it could have more impact. That is why we evolved the role. We have maintained the heart of teacher librarianship but feel we are having a greater impact on teachers and literacy. The fact that instructional team coaches are part of our division's new four-year strategic plan for literacy, we hope to be around for a while to realize it.