

# Librarians, the Hidden Gold of a School: Treasure Mountain Canada 6

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Teacher-librarians occupy a multitude of roles, wearing many hats and seeming to switch between them all in the course of a few minutes. This requires a passion and drive for the position, which was more than evident at Treasure Mountain Canada 6 in Toronto on January 31 and February 1.



As teacher associations were striking and libraries were processing cuts to funding across the country, a group of passionate and dedicated school librarians gathered at Treasure Mountain Canada 6, the Canadian School Libraries bi-annual think tank. The topics of the day were varied: physical space, collection development, assessment, innovation, accessibility, inclusivity and more. For these determined librarians, no aspect of the profession was off the table for discussion.

## Collection Development



Rabia Khokar of TDSB speaks on the first day of TMC6.

One of the most popular topics of discussion at TMC6 was library collection and its representation of the school population. Librarians at TMC6 were focused on purchasing literature that represents a variety of races, ethnicities, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations. Deborah Dundas of the Toronto Star shared her research on the race and ethnicity of main characters in children's books, which sparked discussion among attendees. School librarians agreed that students need to see themselves in the literature they are reading – and not simply as a tertiary

character or as a villain. In discussion, one librarian noted the value of books printed in multiple languages, showing an example of a book in her collection that was printed in both Plains Cree and English. Rabia Khokar, librarian at TDSB, questioned what this should look like in a racially homogenous school, asking “What do representations of other races and ethnicities in literature *do* at a school that is mostly white?” Her research, based in Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) demonstrated that children become more empathetic, caring, and committed to action for equity as they are exposed to a variety of races and ethnicities in literature. Overwhelmingly, the data demonstrates that all students benefit from a library collection that is diverse and inclusive.

Another conversation around collection development focused on Canadian School Libraries initiative “I Read Canadian”. Championed by Eric Walters, this program encourages Canadian schools to purchase and place a spotlight on Canadian literature. In a culture that is frequently inundated by American media, Eric Walters emphasized that it is more important than ever to hold onto Canadian identity through literature. Many librarians excitedly shared their plans to celebrate Canadian literature in February. While it may seem that these two collection focuses – “diversity” and “Canadian” – seem at odds with one another, Eric Walters noted that Canada is built upon the principle of multiculturalism, and this is evident in Canadian media.

### Physical Space

The space of a library learning commons was as much up for discussion as the materials that are housed in there. Many discussed the need for their library spaces to take on as many roles as the librarians do. The perplexing requirements of an effective library space include: flexible, but with some structure; quiet



CSL and Eric Walters’ initiatives, the Summer Lending Program and “I Read Canadian” day, have inspired librarians across Canada.

spaces for work, but with noisier areas for collaboration; infused with technology while still focusing on the books; and being dressed with soft seating along with standard tables and chairs for work. Many school librarians spoke about needing to have a place for students *and* teachers to work and find resources.

Another concern about library space was accessibility. Is the library accessible by all users? Is the library dependent on the librarian to be used? Are students using the library for one purpose only – circulation – or is it viewed as a gathering space in the building? Librarians from across the country agreed that support at the administrative level was paramount for creating a library that was central to the school culture. Another question related to accessibility questioned the closure of school libraries during summer. In an effort to prevent the summer slide, Eric Walters and the CSL created the School Library Summer Lending Challenge. Anita Brooks Kirkland presented the findings from the previous summer’s experiment into summer lending, citing the need to support our most disadvantaged learners during the long break between school years. The results of the program were astounding: students were excited to be able to read during summer, libraries reported very few losses (if any), and librarians and administrators noted that the value of the program far outweighed any financial loss of replacing missing books. This program is just one example of the many ways school libraries and their administrators are transforming schools.

### Transformation

While cynics have decried the death of print (and therefore libraries) for decades, school librarians continue to prove that they are often the center of educational innovation. The role no longer represents just the “keeper of the books”. While school librarians are responsible for collection development and maintenance, nowadays the role encompasses so much more. Librarians have always been tasked with providing their patrons with access to information, so the change from print-based media to digital media placed school librarians in the perfect position to be innovators and agents of change in their buildings.



Jennifer Casa-Todd's Global Ed Chat inspired others to consider the role of technology in inquiry.

Librarians from across the country at TMC6 proved repeatedly that they are at the center of their school's transformative action. One of the highlights of the conference was a presentation by Garfield and Laura Gini-Newman on the topic of assessment. With so many school librarians supporting classroom teachers in inquiry-based learning, the discussion around student feedback and assessment was an inspiring start to the day. Librarians discussed how they could support this method of assessment in the library and many groups focused on the ability of the librarian, as an

additional teacher and guide, to direct students to further inquiry for deeper learning. Many groups also noted that libraries provide an ideal space for meeting to discuss inquiry questions and access expertise.

Further to this idea, presenter by Leigh Cassell spoke about the many positive aspects of videoconferencing in education. Jonelle St. Aubyn's paper on the Human Library and Jennifer Casa-Todd's Global Ed Chat project further highlighted Cassell's message: that libraries can help students connect not only to information, but to people. The idea of people as resources ignited ideas and discussion amongst the group. How could student inquiry be informed and impassioned by connecting with others, be they experts in their field or other learners with the same questions?

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Amongst strikes, cuts to funding, loss of libraries, and the looming pandemic, I expected to meet a group of school library representatives that were hanging on to support children's literacy. What I got was so much better. I entered a room of passionate, and thoughtful educators; they were innovators and collaborators that were excited to inspire and connect with one another. The "Big Think", led by David Loertscher, is perhaps the best demonstration of the nature of school librarians. At the close of the conference, school library

representatives grouped together to answer the big questions about the Library Learning Commons (LLC), including: how can they support inclusion, how can they transform, how can they invite others to experiment and inquire?

Librarians do not shy away from these questions, they approach them with open-mindedness and a thirst to collaborate and inquire further.

One of my greatest takeaways from the day came from one of Loertscher's prompts during the Big Think. It said "Transformations in the school library learning commons are never finished, always in beta". School libraries and their librarians are essential to the growth and adaptations of school culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are constantly evolving to meet the needs of the communities they serve, and this is why it takes an exceptional educator to become a part of the ever-changing machine that is the library.