EXEMPLARY SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN ONTARIO

The Ontario
Library Association

a study by Queen's Universi
and People for Education

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CONTENTS

Introduction 3

Libraries and literacy 4

Libraries as hubs 6

Principals and libraries 8

Teachers and libraries 10

The teacher-librarian 13

The continuum of exemplary school library practice 18

- Continuum chart 21
- Level 1 school library programs 22
- Level 2 school library programs 24
- Level 3 school library programs 26
- Level 4 school library programs 28

The student's perspectives 30

Ongoing challenges 34

Conclusion 36

Methodology 38

Appendix "A": School Library Profiles 40

Appendix "B": Student Survey 44

exemplary schoo libraries

The elementary schools in this study were drawn from a diverse set of communities in Southern Ontario, including large urban and more rural settings. The school communities represented various levels of socioeconomic status and served both immigrant and non-immigrant students. Each of the schools had at least 200 students, although the average school population was larger.

The study involved 8 elementary school libraries selected by the Ontario School Library Association based on input from regional contacts in the association. These libraries were chosen because they had been previously identified as having exemplary library programs.

In order to obtain rich information about these programs and identify the stories, relationships, policies, and practices surrounding a exemplary library program, we obtained:

- relevant school and library documents related to literacy initiatives that involve the school library
- a summary of extra-curricular library practices and procedures as well as those that are integrated with classroom activities and programs;
- interviews with the school administration, teachers, and librarians;
- student and teacher surveys, and
- observations of the operation of the elementary school library and teacher librarian. more.

introduction

Exemplary School libraries are a central hub of the school. They are prominently placed and a centre of activity and learning. The teacher librarians in such programs commonly collaborate with other teachers in the school, and they find ways to engage the community to best support children's learning.

"The best thing about our school library is the librarian. She is kind and helpful. Without her there is no library."

A student in one of the case studies

The purpose of this project was to identify the characteristics of an exemplary elementary school library. We asked the questions: What are the characteristics that exemplary libraries have in common? and What are the things that make them unique?

What we discovered is that the vision of the library as a classroom and a welcoming place of learning are the key facets of exemplary school libraries. When the school library and teacher-librarian are recognized as playing a critical role in supporting the educational outcomes of the school, the term "exemplary" can be attached to the school library.

This work is a continuation of a study funded by the Ontario Library Association. It was conducted in a unique partnership between researchers from Queen's University and the non-profit organization, People for Education.

We wanted to begin to understand the characteristics and procedures that enable a school library to be an integral part of a school's literacy initiatives and overall success.

What we found will provide a foundation for identifying the procedures and practices that are most associated with exemplary library programs. We believe this information will be of value for the broader community of teacher librarians, classroom teachers, and administrators responsible for increasing and/or maintaining student literacy achievement, as well as parents who share the role of supporting children's literacy development.

The school library, located beside the school office, colourfully reflects the energy and enthusiasm with which Ms. V. embraces her role as a teacher librarian. The front window looks onto the school's courtyard entrance, and beside one of the many "cozy corners," complete with comfortable chairs and a round table, stands Sir Bob, a knight in full armour. At least ten big stuffed animals can be found flopped out on top of shelves filled with books – at an easy to reach height for those tempted to read them. Walls are plastered with posters of the latest publications for the Forest of Reading. There is a computer lab, a piano, and, of course, a nice bit of floor space furnished with a cushioned wooden rocking chair.

Research has shown that a well-stocked library, staffed by a credentialed library media specialist, has a positive impact on student achievement, regardless of the student's socio-economic status.

Accountability, data and education polity

"Accountability" and "data driven decision making" have become operational mantras in public education.

In Ontario, literacy has been the most prevalent issue raised in this accountability framework, with the goal to have a greater proportion of students obtaining expected standards.

Data driven decision-making is used not only to ascertain whether students and schools are meeting achievement standards, but also to find ways to address issues and concerns. Curriculum reform, changing educational practices, and program implementation have been the dominant mechanisms by which these "accountability" issues have been addressed.

School libraries and fiscal restraint

Interestingly, these wide-ranging accountability initiatives are being implemented at a time when financial constraints require the majority of schools to find ways to reduce operational costs. 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 student support services.

School libraries have been particularly vulnerable to such funding cuts, and declines in educational funding directed towars Tw 0 - Tw T*0014 Tw T* [(declines in eb0 -1] e

libraries as “hubs”

Key to an exemplary library program is the teacher-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.

Staff attitudes key for exemplary school libraries

In the two schools in the initial case studies, the teacher-librarians, classroom teachers and the school administrators all considered the library as a classroom and an important place for learning.

The teacher-librarians in the two initial case studies endeavoured to create a school library that was welcoming to both teachers and students. They believed their primary role was the promotion of student learning and saw the library as the centre of the school. These librarians made the library the heart of the school and seized on every opportunity to teach in an engaging fashion, bringing an enthusiasm that drew students and staff into the library.

Similarly, principals in the schools considered the school library as the core place for the school for the success of learning and teaching. They recognized the critical role they played in supporting the teacher-librarian as a key teaching member of their staff.

In part because of the leadership of the principals, classroom teachers in the schools took every opportunity they could to work collaboratively with the teacher-librarians, often sharing in lesson planning and delivery.

Student satisfaction

Students reported high levels of satisfaction and engagement with the school library. They were active readers and the majority also wanted to have more opportunities to use the school library

Libraries with multiple roles

Clearly, we found both of these programs to be exemplary in the practices of the teacher librarian and the educational support provided by the school library.

We also found that even within these two schools, the library has multiple roles, extending beyond those of book selection, or as a place for reading and research.

The teacher-librarians went far beyond simply managing books and resources or providing preparation time coverage.

There was a qualitative difference between the two schools in terms of activities within the libraries. These activities varied in terms of the amount of teacher collaboration, library use, and ongoing library programs.

Students in the first school library case study reported a much wider variety of activities. As an example, there was a substantial difference between schools with respect to the impact of the “Forest of Reading” program.

Key to a truly exemplary library program was that the teacher-librarian took on a broader educational role within the school, providing support for classroom teachers through partnering and collaboration, supporting all students through shared teaching and cross-curricular support or integration of curriculum.

in one school. This appeared to be due largely to time constraints outside of the control of the teacher librarian. "Students mainly use the school library for book exchange. Fifteen minutes is all we are allocated as a class, so strictly, the librarian is not there, because it's during her prep time. Kids very quickly flock to return their books and sign another one out."

Difference in both expectations and availability for partnering time existed. In one school, the principal expected every teacher to partner with the teacher-librarian at least once per year. Partnerships appeared to happen on a first come, first served basis in the other school. "There are so many other teachers in the school, and she (the teacher-librarian) is tatirook."

The traditional use of the school library for book selection and exchange remained a core component of the library program, but the teachers we interviewed clearly articulated the other qualities of an exemplary library program. What emerged from the interviews were the discernable stages or levels that define exemplary.

The exemplary library is a classroom and a welcoming place of learning for students in the school, in sharp contrast to a separate place to "visit."

Developing partnerships

Teachers in the school did book partnering time with their teacher-librarian, though the students' primary use of the library was still book exchange

government, and the creation of a film from the novel *Charlotte's Web*, where students made models, wrote the script, and directed and videotaped the story.

Benefits for other teachers

One of the benefits of partnering cited by the teachers was that each teacher could bring his or her own strengths to the partnership. Similarly, teachers assisted each other in building skills in areas where they themselves may be less knowledgeable.

The teacher-librarian was considered a key teacher who was knowledgeable in many fields, could see the big picture and was capable of tapping into many resources inside and outside the school.

In one case, a classroom-teacher explained how partnering with the teacher-librarian had taught her how to tackle teaching drama, a subject she was not comfortable with.

From field trips to projects—multiple uses for libraries and librarians

Flexibility was an important and appreciated quality.

"When we're doing an inquiry-based project where we want to have all the teachers and students involved together in groups once a week, we were able to find one period here and there and the teacher-librarian would change around her prep periods to accommodate us."

The teacher-librarian[(C-n-5(a[(j24)sa71(d sah)-5(e)1(r p)-4(r)1(e)i49.84che)-4venge)-5(ar)3 8e-4vengu T*yzr
involved tobo-5(e)k imae(rs assiJ -0.-0.org5(ar)-iz)-4(r)1()]TJ- -0.

Challenges

Teachers identified a number of barriers

the teacher-librarian

An exemplary library program is a hub from which learning branches out into all areas of the school.

This vision of the library as a place for learning and teaching emerged again and again in response to a range of questions.

Innovation and challenge

The librarians in the case studies continually worked to move beyond their current success, challenging themselves and their program, rather than simply repeating what they had done. This is in contrast to a more traditional approach where, once a lesson, an activity, or an event is successful, it is repeated, becoming a routine. The repetition is understandable, but it does not address important nuances that require adaptation.

These teacher-librarians did not turn successes into routines. For example, one described a successful parent initiative that in many good library programs would be repeated again; however, in her program she consciously changed it every year. "staff, and students and parents all come together and every year we change it to keep it fresh but still supporting the whole theme of literacy." It was not change for novelty's sake but rather the outcome of reflection and evaluation.

From partner collaboration, linking to school initiatives, parent programs and book exchange the librarians set themselves high expectations, and sought out challenges for themselves and for the program.

"I really enjoy my job, I enjoy the kid never boring, always challenging. I' able to find a new creative twist tha know existed."

This striving for improvement was employed as a deliberate strategy. The teacher-librarians individually modeled life-long learning by seeking out learning opportunities in areas that were new to them and then transferred it back to the library to enhance their program.

Engaged and enthusiastic

The teacher-librarians in these school libraries were enthusiastic about their jobs, with one stating "I tell everybody I have the best job in the entire school…because you get to see it all."

Although they had different personalities and expressed this enthusiasm with distinct styles, there was a high level of engagement in the job. This was apparent from the range of programs each had developed for their libraries and their wider involvement in their schools, serving on grade level and administrative teams.

They each had a positive outlook towards the staff and spoke with real appreciation of the students. They recognized the challenges faced by their schools but interpreted these as opportunities; they weren't discouraged but relished the challenges.

"Forest of Reading"

In two of the initial case studies, the teacher-librarians not only ran very successful Forest of Reading programs but

> 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…all the resources are used endlessly."
>
> **A teacher-librarian in one of the case studies**

they had given them twists to infuse more learning objectives.

"I think that one of the important qualities that my school library program has that makes it successful is that a lot of it is open flexible partner time. We all bring different strengths so that when we plan a unit, or when we are teaching it or marking it that we all bring different perspectives."

Going beyond expectations

Each of the teacher-librarians in the initial case studies had desi

Time makes all the difference

Funding was named as the biggest challenge as it determined the librarian's appointment and thus the amount of time that could be devoted to teaching. In two of the case studies the teacher-librarians reported that their library had benefited

They also demonstrated an awareness of the need to be flexible in their work with staff. This allowed them to maximize the teaching of students. In essence they saw both selling the benefits of the library program and teaching the staff through education and support as part of their role. They sought to provide ever-

community. They actively “advertise” the benefits of the school library on student learning and school effectiveness. However, enhancing programming and modifying school contexts is a process that requires time and energy. Thus the knowledge, expertise, experience, and communication skills of the teacher librarian are vitally important in creating the conditions for this evolution to occur.

The teachers’ and principal’s understanding of the role of the school library program and the teacher-librarian are equally important. A teacher-librarian will have to devote more time and energy in selling the benefits of the school library program to those having a limited understanding of the teacher-librarian's instructional role. Such “promotional” efforts on the part of the teacher librarian

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Library's role in school	Operates within school culture	Partnerships are		

level 1

directly involved in instruction.

While primarily working in a support role, teacher-librarians in exemplary Level 1 library programs continue to work to enhance the instructional opportunities

level 2

A distinguishing characteristic of Level 2 school libraries is an increased emphasis on integrating instruction.

Library programs functioning at a Level 2 have fewer constraining school contexts than those at Level 1 and play an important and ongoing role, supporting classroom teachers and students' learning, but they are not viewed as central to achieving the school's purpose.

Similar to exemplary Level 1 school library programs, effective teacher-librarians working at Level 2 actively try to modify their context to enhance the role of the library within the school.

The increased emphasis on integrating instruction in Level 2 libraries is the result of many factors within the context. For year wi6(ans w)-6(o)2(r Tw 0o F)-6 Tc rowotsxt. (o)2

Exemplary Level 2 library programs benefit from greater administrative support. Principals in these schools typically held 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.

"But it's a process. If you'd have come the first year it would have been different…one of the things the principal and I talked about as a strategy was finding the teachers you know would be on board like that."

Funding is often unstable from year-to-year with administrators providing partial funding, at least for a period of time. This funding is used to provide prep coverage so that the librarian can focus more time on instruction and planning. These efforts allow librarians working within a Level 2 context to begin to make meaningful connections with classroom teachers and encourage greater use of the library and its services alongside a focus on instruction.

- accessing outside resources such as authors and theatre companies,
- bringing more parents into the library, and
- creating book clubs.

The librarians in the Level 3 programs we observed were continuing to strive to improve their library program, through self-evaluation and critical retrospections of library related instructional activities.

These librarians modeled life-long learning, seeking out learning opportunities in areas that were new to them and then transferring it back to the library to enhance their program.

Successful teaching, from partner collaboration, linking to school initiatives, parent programs, and book exchanges, was an ever-moving target that they were continually working to hit.

This high level of engagement resulted in a variety of intriguing and unique library programs, and extensive school involvement. The examples provided in the case studies above, including unique clubs and innovative uses of the Forest of Reading program, highlight methods by

level 4

We were unable to categorize any programs as level 4, as unfortunately, school libraries in Ontario receive intermittent support.

What differentiates Level 4 programs from Level 3, is that they have systematic administrative support at the school, school board, and provincial levels, both in funding and policy.

> 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)
>
> **Teacher-librarian in a Level 3 exemplary school library**

Exemplary Level 4 school library programs represent the most effective library programs.

In many of the previous levels, we witnessed outstanding librarians with models programs of instructional integration; however, these librarians continually faced the possibility that the library position could be cut. Their current support was at the discretion of the principal and board policy.

This ongoing funding concern for library programs prevented the library programs we observed from being considered Level 4. This lack of systematic support hinders the development of exemplary library programs and it is only due to the outstanding professionalism of librarians that we were able to observe a number of Level 3 programs.

Similarly, lack of systemic support at the provincial level means that having a school librarian, much less an exemplary program, is largely based on good fortune, rather than systematic efforts. School library programs that are supported may suddenly 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. The quote from the case study above highlights this continual challenge for school library programs, challenges that currently prevent the school libraries we observed from being considered Level 4.

The Students' Perspectives

The students who completed surveys were very positive about their school libraries.

When we initiated this study, it was our intention to use student surveys to examine the consistency of exemplary school library programs in terms of the services provided to students.

We collected student data on the changing use of school libraries from samples of students in each of the schools we observed. The survey was organized into five major sections: (a) student demographics and school attitudes; (b) library activities during class time and during students' own time; (c) items used in the library and factors that help students choose books; (d) librarian characteristics and perceptions; and (e) students' reading attitudes and perceptions (See Appendix "A").

Figure 1 contains the results from nine survey items examining students' perceptions of the teacher-librarian. The proportions of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement are reported in Figure 1, representing positive perceptions for each attribute. Not surprisingly, students were less likely to turn to the school librarian for help with homework. There was variability in the perceived amount of the teacher-librarians' computer and the internet expertise. This is not surprising given that these school libraries differed in terms of computer access. 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.

"The best thing about our school library is that the librarian gets us involved in a lot of programs like the Historica fair."

Figure 1: Students' Perceptions of the Teacher Librarian.

Figure 2 contains our findings regarding students' perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher-librarian.

These findings help illustrate the ways that students view the function of the school library. Students responded to these items with a "Yes" or "No" response, and the Figure contains the proportion of students responding "Yes" to the specific item.

As presented on Figure 2, these exemplary teacher-librarians were considered an important resource in the school, teaching students how to do research (92%), and use the computer (65% to 80%), among other visible responsibilities.

Interestingly, over 60% of the students reported that these teacher-libral libr

Some of these differences were due to the physical structure of the library. For example, the increasing demand for Instructional Technology has resulted in changes to several school library programs so that now their key purpose includes elements of instructional technology and they have attached computer labs. The teacher librarian is expected to manage and incorporate this technology into his or her library program, and students in these schools commonly use the library for this purpose. However, other school library programs do not serve this purpose.

Hence the school context plays an important role in understanding the students' perceptions of the teacher librarian and more importantly, the role of the school library. The Profile Graphs highlight the variability in school library programs.

Figure 3 contains the same results provided in Figure 1 on the previous page separating the average proportions for each school.

The proportions of students across the schools who reported they used the library at least a couple of times are reported in this first graph, representing

ongoing challenges

The challenges facing school libraries are part of the context in which the school library operates, and are important factors in determining the current effectiveness of the school library and the teacher librarian.

from delivering excessive amounts of preparation time and, perhaps most significantly, by clearly acknowledging the teacher-librarian's leadership role among the teachers in the school.

Principals who understand the impact of exemplary school library programs on student learning are vital, yet in the context of Ontario where less than 15% (People for Education, 2008) of elementary schools have a full-time teacher-librarian, principals tend to lack sufficient experience with library programs to have an understanding of how well-supported library programs can contribute to the school's educational goals.

The low level of comprehensive library programs in elementary schools also creates a situation in which teachers have not had 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 justify their place in education. Without the support of elementary school principals exemplary school libraries cannot exist.

4. Delivering preparation time

Principals in this study identified the use of the teacher-librarian to cover preparation time as an increasing pressure.

One of the biggest obstacles elementary school principals face is human resources. Labour agreements with elementary teachers have included increasing amounts of preparation time each year over three years. Preparation time must be covered by other qualified teachers in the school, and teacher-librarians are frequently assigned this role. The greater amount of time that a teacher-librarian must devote to preparation coverage the more restraints there are on instructional collaboration with teachers and the more restrictions on open scheduling.

5. Lack of knowledge

School libraries are often in difficult situations. A lack of experience and an unawareness of how school library programs can contribute to education prevents teachers, administrators and policy makers from considering the school library programs as an essential component of education.

There is less support for libraries when libraries are considered an adjunct to education, further perpetuating a narrow role for school libraries. Teacher-librarians must constantly advocate for the presence of a school library program, unlike teachers and administrators who are more of a given within the educational system. Leadership at the provincial level from the Ministry of Education is essential to alter this view of the role of school libraries.

6. Lack of systemic policy

As long a school libraries are not an integral part of the educational system at the provincial level through provincial funding, and staffing policy the school library cannot realize its full potential in contributing to the education of Ontario's students.

While some students may be fortunate enough to encounter a board or principal who, through effective policy, fosters the development of an exemplary library program, other students may never have that opportunity.

All students throughout all of their schooling deserve more.

Thereare exemplary school library programs in Ontario, but there is not a unitary conception of an exemplary school program, nor is there is a single approach that creates an exemplary library program.

These programs are unique but they all provide a valued educational service to the students fortunate enough to be in these schools.

A key attribute of these exemplary library programs is the exemplary teaching skills

did not provide any new information not covered in the interviews. It also appears there were some concerns that completing the survey would be viewed as an attempt to evaluate a peer, a practice not allowed under the collective agreement for teachers.

Expanding the study and adapting the method

Once the two initial Case Studies were completed, we expanded the study to include 6 more cases.

These new cases enabled us to further explore our findings in the initial two cases and to also identify other aspects of exemplary school library programs not previously identified. The interview protocols and survey instruments were slightly revised for these cases. Principal interviews were shorter and the teacher surveys were not used. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and the students' surveys were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. Our analyses included thematic analyses of the qualitative data and descriptive statistics and appropriate inferential statistics.

Appendix "A"

School library profiles

Figure 4 contains the 13 items from the student survey related to how frequently students use the school library during class time (the first 4 items) and during their own time (the last 9 items).

For example, the results presented on Figure 3 demonstrate that there was relatively large variability in students' perceptions regarding their teacher librarian's knowledge of the internet (48% to 100%), while there was little variability across the schools in terms of students' perceptions that the teacher librarian was helpful (92% to 100%).

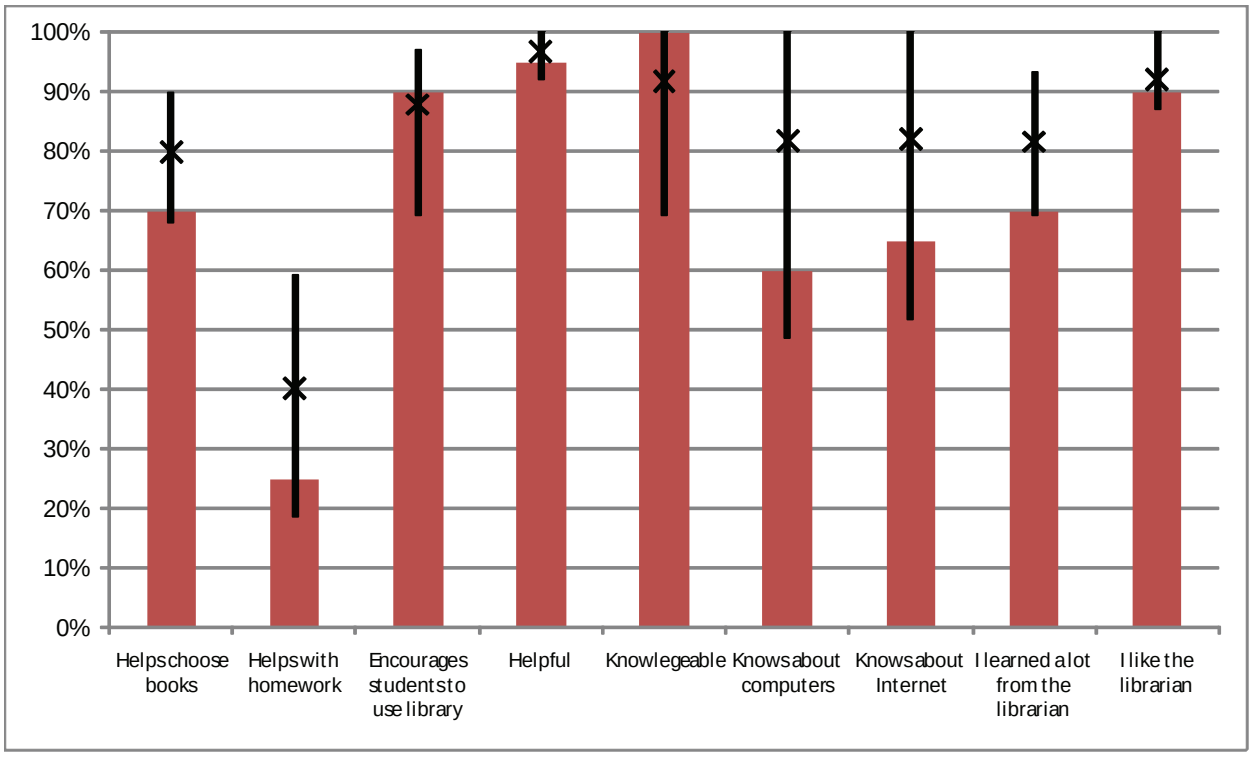
There was greater variability in students' use of the school library (see Figure 4).

As highlighted on Figure 4, frequent class use (at least 2 times per week) of the school library for computers (item 1) varied between 5% and 88% across the schools, with the average being 40%. Not surprisingly, there was much less variability in the use of the library to find books, ranging between 38 and 100%, with the average being 75%.

Using student results to evaluate libraries

After reviewing these results, we discovered these students' perceptions could also provide a valuable internal evaluation tool for school libraries. An individual School Profile could be created and compared to the range of profiles that are found across schools. Examples of these

Figure 4: School Variability in Students' Use of the School Library



Such findings can be used to set school library priorities and examine the effectiveness of the current programs.

For example, if the current library program endeavours to provide students a place to go after school or at lunch to quietly read or do homework, the results suggest the school library is being somewhat underused for these purposes. In contrast, if the primary function of the school library is to provide resource materials for students, it is fulfilling its mandate.

Appendix “B”

1. I am a O girl. O boy.
2. I am _____ years old.
3. I am in Grade _____.
4. I was born in _____ (country).
5. I have lived in Canada for_____ years.
6. I have lived in Ontario for_____ years.
7. I have _____ sisters and_____ brothers.
8. The first language I learned to speak was_____.
9. The language I speak most often at home is_____.
10. During this school year, which of the following activities did you do with members of your family? We went
    a) to places like a museum or Science Centre O Yes O No
    b) to things like music concerts, plays, or the art gallery O Yes O No
    c)

19. Right now, I have _____ books or magazines from the school library at home.
Insert number of books

20. Right now, I have _____ books or magazines from the school library at school.
Insert number of books

21. Please select Yes for each item you used this school year in the school library. Please select No for each item you did not use this year in the library.

a) Encyclopedia ..... O Yes O No

b) Dictionary or thesaurus .....

23. We also would like to learn more about your school librarian. What things does your librarian do? Check the Yes circle if the librarian does the activity, and the No circle if the librarian did not do the activity. The school librarian:

a) Helps me find books to read O Yes O No

b) Brings in authors to talk379.55tTtb7rMCID 4 >>BDC BT /TT0 1 Tf 0.0003 Tc -0.0015 Tw 12

33. Now tell us about your school library.
Select the circle that best describes how much you agree with each of the following

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Websites

Ontario School Library Association:

http://www.accessola.com/osla/

People for Education:

http://www.peopleforeducation.ca