

Being essential: Library values, educational beliefs, and social justice principles that improve and sustain school libraries

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

Snapshot

In a further exploration of The Essential School Library concept Dr Gordon considers the values and principles that underpin quality, essential school library services. The article has a particular focus on the data from the 2018 'Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Student of the Commonwealth'.

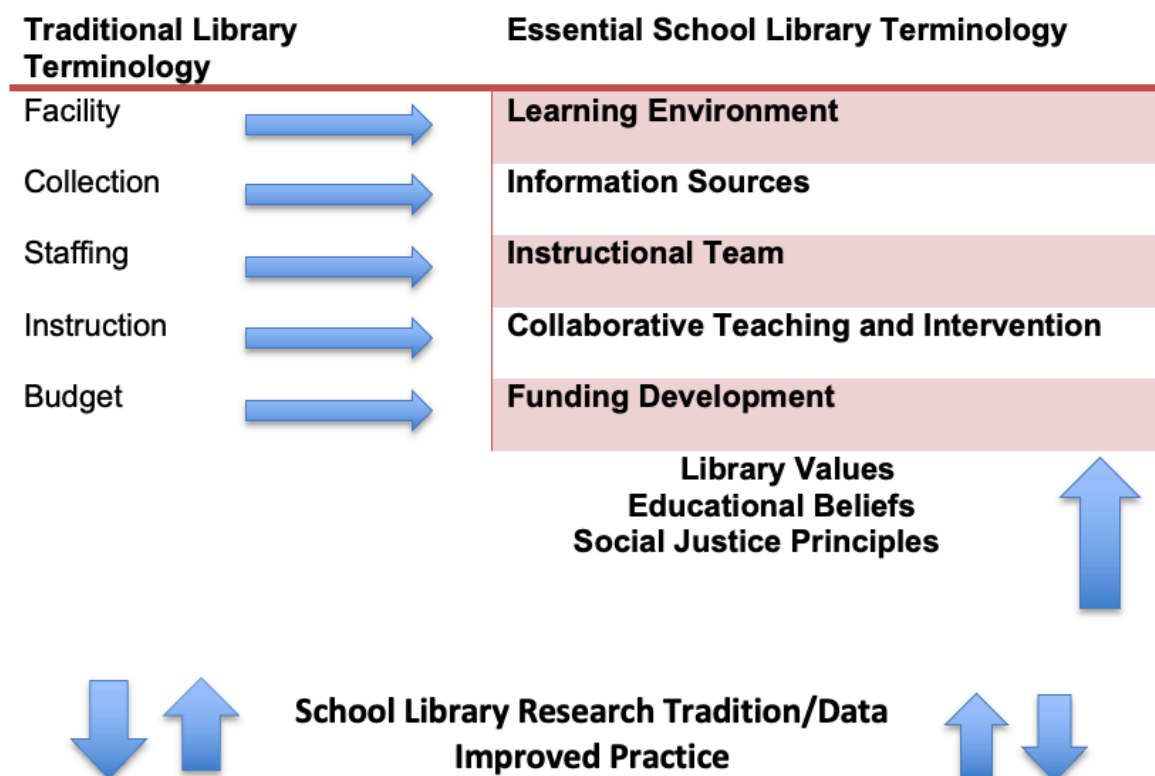
In recent times practices and policies that impede the efforts of librarians and educators to attain a fairer and more just society are gaining momentum. ALA reports book challenges and bannings have risen in 2021 in the United States.

Library staff in every state faced an unprecedented number of attempts to ban books. ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services in 2021, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals. Most targeted books were by or about Black and LGBTQIA+ persons. (American Library Association, 2022)

While censorship of books is increasing in the age of a virtually' uncensored internet, it is only the tip of the iceberg. Teacher librarians are experiencing challenges to three traditions that distinguish their profession: Library values that support a free and democratic society; Social justice principles that promote equitable access to and meaningful use of school library resources and services; and educational beliefs that promote learners' meaningful use of the school libraries' resources and services. This powerful triad is the conceptual foundation for the Essential School Library that acknowledges school libraries as social and political institutions with a strong educational mission. The Essential School Library is a research-based model that re-defines the library's functions by shifting from traditional terminology, largely borrowed from the language of business to a learner-centric vocabulary. (Table 1)

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Table 1. A conceptual framework for the Essential School Library



Library values

Libraries have traditionally been places where knowledge is free and accessible and multiple points of view are welcomed and encouraged. The American Library Association (ALA) has formally adopted these values which include: Stewardship; Service; Intellectual Freedom; Rationalism; Literacy and Learning; Equity of Access; Privacy; and Democracy (Gorman, 2015). At one time, in the not too distant past, these values seemed self-evident and within the norms of healthy representative democracies. An abundance of historical and traditional practice, codified in law and woven into the fabric of the democratic state, support these values associated with a fair and just society.

Educational beliefs

Educational beliefs are a strong driver of the values and behaviors of teacher librarians, principals, teachers, and parents. How they think about teaching and learning is also a critical factor in how they view the role of the school library. Two main schools of thought about how learners learn and how they are best taught co-exist in our institutions of learning: Essentialism and Constructivism. Essentialism is a belief that children should learn traditional basic subjects and essential skills belonging to a culture, such as reading, writing, arithmetic in primary grades. Teaching to the test is a common approach in teacher-centric classrooms. Educators on local, state, and national levels decide what students learn, with little regard to learners' interests. Teachers embed traditional values such as respect for authority, fidelity to duty, consideration of others, and the knowledge students need to be good citizens. The accumulated knowledge of our civilization is taught through the academic disciplines as they are passed on from teacher to students.

On the other hand, Constructivism posits that social construction consists of meanings we attach to symbols and things. Meanings are not inside the things but are attached to them socially (Piaget, 2013). Learning is manifested in meaningful use when individuals actively construct a product in the real world (Piaget, 1968). Teacher librarians often hold educational beliefs from the constructivist school of thought, such as Guided Inquiry (Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2015).

Social justice principles

Social justice concepts are imbedded in the historical origins of the school library. Horace Mann, Secretary to the Massachusetts Legislature and known as ‘the father of public education’ in the U.S., endorsed and legislated common (primary) schools that were financed by property

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taxes collected by each town in the state. This practice inevitably resulted in inequitable funding of public schools and their school libraries. Prior to 1837 public libraries in Massachusetts were few in number and their book collections were small.

Distributive justice addresses how goods and services are distributed in a society by distinguishing between a utilitarian and egalitarian approach to access and use. Utilitarianism defines social justice as the greatest good for the greatest number. Administrators, legislators, and governmental entities usually operate on the level of the common good. Their decisions generally ensure practices and policies that result in equality, not equity. Inevitably, when resources and services are prioritized in a school setting, or by a state legislature or local school board, it is often the case that policies will favor the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. On the other hand, egalitarianism views social justice as what is equitable. The operative principle is that everyone receives what they need to succeed. Classroom teachers and teacher librarians tend to exhibit an egalitarian disposition to the allocation and distribution of resources and services so that all learners get what they need. These philosophical distinctions can help teacher librarians to understand decisions that result in policies and practices that manifest as barriers to their school libraries becoming effective and essential.

The school library research tradition

Horace Mann, Secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education in the 19th century, was able to sell the idea of the common-school library by administering a statewide survey that documented the number of public libraries and their resources and services. In looking at these data Mann was disturbed by the inequity with which the means of knowledge were spread over the Commonwealth – a few deep, capacious reservoirs surrounded by broad wastes. Mann concluded,

It has long been a common remark that many persons read too much; but here we have proof, how many thousands read too little. For the poor man and the laboring man, the art of printing seems hardly yet to have been discovered. (O’Connell, 1934, 19)

The data collected by Mann documented the number of school libraries, the size and nature of the collections, and the number of people who had access to both. Mann's use of survey research set a tradition that was continued by researchers Mary Gaver at Rutgers the State University of New Jersey and Keith Curry Lance at Colorado State Library, their research focused on how students benefit from school library resources and services. Despite these traditions the digital divide of the late 20th century focused on equality, rather than equity, with an emphasis on acquiring boxes and wires rather than digital literacy. Newman & Gurstein (2016) noted that those higher up in the digital gradient have a social responsibility ... to acknowledge those who continue to be internet non-users.

The Massachusetts study

The state legislature of Massachusetts commissioned a study (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018) to investigate how school libraries could be improved. The researchers conducted a survey to collect data on the status of equitable access to school libraries and meaningful use of them. Verbal and numerical data were collected on staffing, scheduling, resources, instruction, and funding. In addition to the inequities that were found in all these categories across urban, rural, and suburban school districts the study revealed policies and practices that were barriers, or root causes of inequitable access and lack of meaningful use of school library resources and services. The data also identified enablers that were operational in mitigating or removing the barriers.

A utilitarian trend was confirmed by the Massachusetts study (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018) when barriers and enablers were measured and described. Barriers related to school administration emerged in staffing, scheduling, and funding.

Staffing

When statistics and content analysis were applied to numerical and verbal data respectively, findings showed that administrators staffed school libraries with more early career rather than mid-career teacher librarians. This allowed them to hire more teacher librarians at lower salaries. However this practice resulted in a disproportional number of early career staff, who were in need of mentorship and professional development, and fewer mid-career teacher librarians who could provide this support. In the case of late career teacher librarians there was a high rate of retirement, and consequently a loss of experience and expertise. The enabling strategies teacher librarians used to compensate for inadequate staffing included their use of library aides, student volunteers, and parents to minimize their time on non-instructional tasks as well as extended library hours before, during and after school and during lunchtime.

Scheduling

The case of scheduling data showed administrators often used school libraries for standardized testing of students, resulting in significant closings of the libraries during school hours. This decision clearly revealed a utilitarian approach whereby high-test scores on state testing

represented aggregated student learning that was easy to describe numerically compared with benefits of the school library experience which are difficult to measure. This was the most difficult barrier to mitigate or overcome.

Fixed vs. open school library schedules were easier challenges. Primary schools and some middle schools use fixed schedules whereby students visit the library as a class for one period a week for group instruction. Flexible scheduling used in high schools and some middle schools permits teachers to book as much time in the library as needed for students to engage in inquiry learning. This scheduling model supports collaboration between librarian and teacher so that content and skills are taught simultaneously. Teacher librarians emerged as strong enablers in this case, using variations of flexible and fixed scheduling whereby students visit the school library on an ad hoc basis or by a fixed time on a weekly basis. Librarians on fixed schedules devised strategies that allowed primary school students to visit the library in small groups or individually to support sustained inquiry and project learning. Teacher librarians in primary schools related how they adapted their fixed schedules by rotating classes. For example, half of the classes use the library during the first half of the school year so that they can use the library twice a week.

Funding

Funding level data showed school library budgets from rural and urban school districts received statistically less funding than school libraries in suburban districts. This trend was attributed to the practice of funding schools with local property tax revenue. Such a policy inevitably results in inequitable funding across these districts since poverty levels are higher in urban and rural districts. However, when library budgets were compared across each of the three district types, data showed the priorities of principals varied greatly. Discrepancies among principals' priorities related directly to their educational beliefs. Principals who adopted a constructivist approach to teaching and learning were better able to see the value in information literacy and inquiry learning methods, such as Guided Inquiry, which provided interventions for students at the various stages of their information use.

Teacher librarians responded to inadequate funding by adopting enabling strategies that included: using their own funds to purchase books; conducting book fairs that generated revenue through sales; taking advantage of free and subsidized access to state-funded databases, e-books, and discounted library equipment through various state systems such as the Massachusetts Library System, Commonwealth e-books, and resource sharing through inter-library loans. As one teacher librarian noted,

A supportive and visionary principal who values inquiry-based learning and recognizes the impact of a vibrant school library is the single biggest enabler of equitable access. With the vision comes the funding.

An egalitarian trend was confirmed by the Massachusetts study (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018) when barriers and enablers were measured and described. Enablers related to school administration emerged in resources and instruction.

Resources

The Massachusetts study showed how teacher librarians dealt with inequitable access and enabled meaningful use school library resources. It was not surprising that information technology was the

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greatest source of inequity across district types, with rural school libraries experiencing the lowest levels of internet access at school and at home. Administrative decisions to purchase Chromebooks mitigated the issue and teacher librarians offered extended library hours before and after school, during lunchtime and even weekend hours to maximize students' access to digital devices.

Instruction

Meaningful use is a social justice concept that is an important as equitable access. In the school library arena, it can be defined by information literacy standards, evidence-based practice, and promising practices based on formal research. Data from the Massachusetts study revealed how teacher librarians created instructional time to overcome library closings and inadequate staffing using enabling strategies that overcame the limitations of the physical school library.

These strategies included a library website that offered access to library catalog, online tutorials for digital devices and programs, and Ask a Librarian chats. Teacher librarians' educational beliefs were highly visible in data about teaching in the school library. In fact, when asked to prioritize their teaching preferences, they ranked collaboration with classroom teachers as number one.

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Principals tended to support teaching to a test, with particularly interest in state standardized testing. Many teacher librarians reported that their teachers shared this priority and valued the following types of instruction provided by the teacher librarian: digital skills, literacy, and citizenship and internet safety.

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Food for thought from the author

Here are some questions to ponder. I am sure your experiences are very different from the American school library experience. It would be very interesting to me to hear from you, dear readers! drkarolgordonconsulting@gmail.com

1. What barriers, if any, do you encounter in your practice?
2. How would you rate yourself as an enabler of library values? social justice principles? educational beliefs?
3. What are the policies and practices in your school that interfere with your practice? Which support your practice?

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