

School Libraries and Social Justice

By Dr Ross J Todd

I have spent the last week in Bogota, Colombia, participating in the fabulous International Book Fair that is held there each year since 1988. It is a gigantic event, representing publishers, authors, independent media producers, digital curators, and book distributors. It is regarded as one of the most significant annual, cultural and educational events for the entire Latin American region, and draws in thousands of visitors from all over Central and South America, and the Caribbean. The fair is held over two weeks, and from morning to late evening each day, there are a variety of cultural, academic and professional programs for all. It attracts almost a million visitors, who enjoy hearing international guest authors, lectures, presentations, and who participate in dance, music, film and gastronomic samplings. I have never seen so many books in my whole life. The official website is: <http://www.feriadellibro.com> (only in Spanish).

Colombia was the home of Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, who died on April 14th, just before the opening of the Book Fair. Known affectionately as Gabo throughout all of South America, his inspiration as a novelist and short story writer, and his contribution to reading and literacy development across Colombia are highly celebrated. Large iconic photographs of him throughout the book fair ensured his presence was alive and well.

I was involved in the book fair in several ways. First, a two day conference for school librarians was held as part of the fairs program. The conference was opened by the Secretary of Education from the Bogota Ministry of Education, seen as a highly significant presence at the book fair. Given that school libraries are virtually non-existent in Colombia apart from those in private schools and in some large public schools, it was significant that the Secretary of Education signaled a major policy direction in terms of establishing school libraries and building collections. There was recognition of the need to ensure all children have access to quality literature and informational texts and to reading and literacy expertise in the school. This has major implication for the professional education of school librarians. Accordingly, my time at the conference was also spent in meetings with library science educators from the several universities in Bogota, visiting schools and their libraries, and doing a number of media interviews, including a guest appearance on Bogota's morning program of CITYTV.

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One of the key challenges centers on engaging with the school leaders and decision makers in the schools across the country, to advocate for the establishment of a school library in their schools. I have been mulling this

over for some time now, as I have been invited to return to Bogota in October to specifically work with school principals and various administrators. What do I tell them? At the heart of our advocacy agenda is the foundation assumption that school librarians are critical to educational success. We have decades of national and international research studies that provide evidence of the value of a strong school library led by a credentialed school librarian, with particular emphasis on students' academic development through instructional programs focusing on information and technology skills deemed essential for students in the 21st century. Is this the appropriate message? Some of the schools do not even have electricity, let alone a computer of any kind. What will a school library look like there? What will be its core functions? What will motivate the commitment to establishing school libraries?

I am increasingly of the view that central to the argument/rationale for establishing a school library are principles around social justice, first and foremost, and the belief that school libraries constitute, and advance,

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social justice. It is about social advantage, social development, and opportunities for lifelong learning. The public libraries that I visited in Bogota are beacons of social and cultural development, offering a multitude of services for all ages. These are not just traditional information services, but social services and cultural and community services as well, founded on the provision of information. I walked into one public library which had a huge banner on its outside wall that said 'Zero Violence', visible for some distance in the streets surrounding it. Public libraries are highly valued, because they provide so many diverse opportunities for people in all walks of life. They offer the public chances and the opportunity to make the most of their lives through their interactions with information. They offer social capital. It seems to me that some of the core concepts embedded in the social justice discourses – equity of resources, equity of access to advantage, and equality of capabilities – are at the heart of the argument surrounding the value and sustainability of school libraries. Until these principles are in place, there is not much point in talking about school libraries and student achievement.

So, I am asking for your input. Conceptualising school libraries from a social justice angle, not necessarily a student achievement angle, what would this mean? What would be some core ideas? Do drop me an email (rtodd@rutgers.edu) with your thoughts, ideas, arguments and issues. It is an open slate. Give me your thoughts, and I will sum these up in the next column of *Synergy*.

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