

**COMPETITION OR COOPERATION IN AN ERA OF CHANGE:  
TENSIONS BETWEEN SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN  
ALBERTA, CANADA**

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**Introduction:** There is a crisis in school libraries in Canada. Many teacher-librarian positions have been cut from schools and library collections are often old, out-of-date, and not being replenished. The result is that children across Canada may not have adequate access to resources in their schools to complete basic research projects and other assignments. This paper reports on a study of Alberta's public libraries that examined the role public libraries are taking in providing support for children's research and homework assignments. The primary research question being addressed by this study was: What are public libraries in Alberta doing to support children who are completing homework assignments and research projects for school?

**Method:** The data collection for this study was conducted in two stages: interviews with staff members from four public libraries and a survey that was sent to every public library in Alberta in November, 2007.

**Results:** The data from both the interviews and the surveys have been combined and are categorized into three main themes: relationships between school and public libraries; resources (including staffing, collections, and electronic resources); and assignments and information literacy. This study indicates that Alberta's public libraries are taking on more responsibilities that require resources, training, and time, all of which are often in limited supply.

**Conclusion:** There is a tension between school and public libraries and communication between the two is often limited. Nevertheless, the libraries that participated in this study seem hopeful about the future and eager to provide high levels of service to all the children in their communities.

There is a crisis in school libraries in Canada and it is particularly apparent in Alberta. In the 1980s, Alberta school library programs were among the best in the world. Since the early 1990s, the number of teacher-librarians has fallen from more than 550 to less than 25 in a province of 3.5 million people with over 2000 schools. Budgets for school library collection have also plummeted.

Many teacher-librarian positions have been cut from schools and library collections are often old, out-of-date, and not being replenished. As Haycock (2003) notes, "through neglect, too many school libraries are now little more than storage rooms" (p. 9). The

result is that children across Canada may not have adequate access to resources in their schools to complete basic research/inquiry projects and other assignments. Where then do children and their teachers turn for materials to complete their projects? Increasingly, public libraries seem to be filling this role in communities in Alberta where, according to Statistics Canada (2005), the average school has 0.07 percent teacher-librarians and the median spending on collections is less than \$4000 per year.

This study examined the role public libraries are taking in providing support for children's research/inquiry and homework assignments. The primary research question being addressed by this study was: What are public libraries in Alberta doing to support children who are completing homework assignments and research projects for school? Secondary questions included: What perceptions do public library staff members have about school libraries and inquiry? And, what other services are available to children and young adults that might support their learning?

## **Review of the Literature**

A review of the related literature on public library support for children's school-based research projects found very little research on the topic, especially in a North American context. There is a body of literature, more professional in nature, related to the services that public libraries provide to school-aged children. These include things such as author visits, homework help centres, online tutorials, face-to-face, phone and online reference support, reading programs and book clubs. Research done in South Africa and Australia suggests that children and their parents are going to public libraries to find materials and support for children's research projects. For example, Hart's (2003) study of student use of public libraries in Cape Town, South Africa found that "public libraries in South Africa's disadvantaged townships are indeed 'doing the work' of school libraries. The learners rely almost exclusively on the public libraries for their school projects, homework and assignments" (p. 80). Similarly, an Australian study found that public libraries

already demonstrably provide considerable support to formal education and its students, and are in a unique position to do so. Student demand on public libraries is tending to increase for a variety of reasons but there is still little indication of awareness or concern about this from governments, education departments, and individual schools. (Bundy, 2006, p. 134)

These studies report that, for a variety of reasons, public libraries are being used to supplement or replace school libraries, in part because school libraries are non-existent (Hart, 2003) or because they lack adequate resources and services (Bundy, 2006).

Three broad themes emerged from the findings of these studies: school and public library relationships; resources (human, financial, and collections), and projects or assignments that students require assistance with.

Building relationships between school and public libraries came up repeatedly throughout the literature. Communication and a general lack of understanding about each other's roles and purposes were mentioned as problems that can have an impact these relationships. Hart's (2003) study suggests that there is a "need for more systematic and

programmed contact with the local schools or with at least selected grades and teachers. Perhaps then classes could come to the library...for a more structured experience...Perhaps the quality of learning in the library might then be enhanced” (p. 80). Hart (2006a) has noted that public librarians do not have the day-to-day contact with teachers that a school librarian would, meaning that when children come to the public library for assistance, the staff do not always know what the project is or the best way to help them. This challenge highlights that “the relationships between school and public library are crucial to effective information literacy education in public libraries” (p. 6). Bundy (2002) found that school and public libraries will not be able to “achieve their cooperation potential until they understand better the perspectives, contexts and needs of their professional colleagues in the other sector” (p. 68).

A second theme from the literature has to do with resources, including staffing, collections, and physical space. Hart (2000), for example, found that public librarians in Cape Town (South Africa) do not generally have the qualifications or training to provide an enhanced educational role and the facilities they work in are insufficient to support higher levels of service to students. Library staff themselves acknowledge that “they do not know how to support learners in the library, who, all agree, are ill-prepared” (Hart, 2006c, p. 10). Hart (2003) also notes that the lack of training and formal qualifications for many public library staff “might weaken the case for recognition of their role in formal education” (p. 80).

A final theme that emerged from the literature relates to the actual assignments and projects that children are working on when they come to the library for assistance or resources. Hart’s studies in South Africa found that the absence of school libraries in most schools means that public libraries “might be expected to take on a more directly curricular role” (Hart, 2006a, p. 5). Public library staff in this, and other studies conducted by Hart (2000; 2003; 2006b; 2006c) indicate that “learners are inadequately prepared for their information-seeking in the library and that public library staff have to intervene on an individual basis—for example in helping learners understand their assignment topics” (Hart, 2006a, p. 7). When asked, teachers in the local schools seemed to underestimate the difficulties that students often experience in the early phases of their research projects, when meaningful questions are developed.

## **Method**

The data collection for this study was completed in two stages. First, interviews were conducted with staff members from a representative group of public libraries in northern and central Alberta. These interviews were held in November, 2007. Libraries from four urban and suburban communities were asked to participate in the interviews, which were conducted using an interpretive inquiry model (Ellis, 2006). In all four libraries, one or both of the researchers met with either one staff member or with a small group of children’s and youth services staff. The library staff members were asked to complete one of a number of pre-interview activities prior to our meeting (see Appendix 1). The completed activity was used as an entry point into the subsequent interview, which used a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix 2) to engage us in a conversation about

library services for children and youth. Questions specifically related to children's homework and research assignments, and public library perceptions of inquiry-based learning and school library programs in their area.

The second stage of data collection involved a survey that was sent to all public libraries in the province of Alberta. This survey sought to gather additional information about what public libraries are doing to support children's school assignments. Letters were sent to 312 branch and stand alone public libraries in Alberta in October, 2007, inviting them to complete the survey online or on paper. The survey consisted of 17 questions that were designed to gather additional information about what public libraries in the province are doing to support children's school assignments (see Appendix 3 for a complete list of the survey questions). Ninety-six libraries completed the survey, representing a return rate of 31%. Responses were received from public libraries serving the two major cities, Edmonton and Calgary, as well as the next largest cities of Grande Prairie, Red Deer, Sherwood Park, St. Albert, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, and Fort McMurray. These public libraries represent more than 2/3 of the total population of the province. The data from the interviews and the surveys were combined and analyzed for common patterns and themes related to the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998).

## **Findings**

This study was designed to answer the question: What are public libraries in Alberta doing to support children who are completing homework assignments and research projects for school? The data from both the interviews and the surveys have been combined in this report and are categorized into three main themes: relationships between school and public libraries; resources (including staffing, collections, and electronic resources); and assignments and information literacy.

### ***Relationships between School and Public Libraries***

The study participants indicated through their survey responses and the interviews that there is sometimes tension that exists between school and public libraries. This tension may be attributed to a lack of understanding about each other's goals and missions. One response highlights the lack of general awareness that exists about libraries in the community: "I am surprised by the number of people, including adults who do not know the mandate of a library or how to use one." This comment contrasts with another respondent who stated that "both the Public and School Library and Librarians try hard to have a good working relationship and keep each other up to date with libraries and current with all sorts of books." Although there were some comments made about public libraries and school libraries trying to work together and build mutually beneficial relationships, many participants in this study indicated that their relationships with schools in their communities are, at best, difficult to maintain, and at worst, non-existent.

The difficulties that public libraries experience in developing and maintaining relationships with schools and school libraries may also be a result of the decreasing number of teacher-librarians and other staff in school libraries. One librarian noted that

schools have had reductions to their school library personnel in the past few years. As a result we have lost the head of their learning resource centre as far as any communication with their schools. Any communication goes through the school communications staff and it is difficult to know whether it gets passed along to the correct persons.

Another librarian suggested that barriers to improving support for students include “communication between teachers and the public library staff [and the] lack of interest and promotion of the library from the teachers.” With no specific contacts within a school or division, public library staff members often have no one to work with in the schools to promote services and programs or to determine how school and public libraries might collaborate to better serve students in both locations.

### ***Library Resources***

Library resources, including staffing, collections, and electronic resources, are the second theme that emerged from the data. Many respondents indicated that a lack of adequate funding for public libraries in Alberta has meant decreased resources in all aspects of library service. As one librarian wrote, “We feel the pressure of school libraries in our area which are unable to meet the demand of their student populations. Our budget cannot support the level of demand, so we can meet the base demand, but are unable to meet anything more than that.” Another librarian commented that “given our already slender funding...it is highly imprudent to duplicate services already available (or that are supposed to be available) through the school system.”

Concerns about staffing, especially regarding staffing levels and qualifications, is consistently mentioned in the survey and interview data. For example, one library noted that “we don’t have enough professional staff to properly serve the students and this includes programming and reference to our student population.” Another survey respondent indicated that “municipal funding is a barrier to hiring enough staff and even well-trained staff. I would like to hire a teacher or teacher-librarian as program coordinator or as an outreach librarian, but would find it very difficult to attract this type of employee with our current salary grid.” Participants in the study also highlighted a wide range of background experiences and formal education among staff members. From staff members with Master’s level degrees in Education or Library and Information Studies to no formal education or training, the data highlight the varied staffing levels in Alberta’s public libraries. Although many respondents indicated that they try to have staff members available to help students with reference questions or research, respondents also indicated the difficulties in providing these kinds of services with untrained staff or with small numbers of staff members. This problem is highlighted by the comment: “We do not have enough staff to oversee extensive research or homework projects for students. We have been unable to get committed volunteers to carry out these programs as well.”

Many respondents also indicated a strong desire to access professional development opportunities for their staff related to information literacy, curriculum, and research projects. For example, “it would be helpful to have a run down on curriculum so we can

choose books appropriate for the different age groups that come in.” Similarly, “knowledge of resources that the children would use (those that match the curriculum prescribed by Alberta Ed) and how to use them would be an asset.” Finally, “instruction should also be provided to library staff on teaching methodologies so they can work with the respective educators supporting their efforts rather than working in opposition.” Professional development activities, including workshops and conference sessions, on curriculum and information literacy seem to be of interest to many of the participants in this study.

Print collections are another resource that can effect how public library support children’s research assignments. Limited funds for purchasing print resources is an ongoing concern expressed throughout the data. In spite of budgetary concerns, many respondents indicated that they try to provide a range of print resources, including materials that encourage recreational reading and support research. As one respondent noted, “within the constraints of a small budget, we really try to keep a vibrant and up-to-date juvenile non-fiction collection.” Some public libraries try to support students by loaning blocks of books on a specific topic to teachers for use in their classrooms. A common concern by many respondents is best described as “curriculum grid lock”, a problem that occurs when every school teaches the same content at the same time. This means there is tremendous pressure on the resources available in one community on a particular topic. One librarian commented that “we simply could never have the resources to handle the volume” of requests when this situation occurs.

The study also highlights that public libraries are facing an identity crisis about their responsibilities in terms of collection development. The public library has a mandate to provide services and materials to a wide range of patrons (from “birth to death” as one survey respondent noted). One librarian noted that “we don’t specifically purchase course related material, just general knowledge material on subjects.” This comment highlights the conflicts that exist about the public library’s mandate in terms of collection development. A similar comment describes the situation in even clearer terms: “When do the duties and costs of [the] Department of Education fall into the realm of public libraries? Our primary service is to ‘supplement’ curriculum, NOT provide the curriculum.”

A final theme related to resources has to do with electronic information. Public libraries provide access to computers and the Internet for public use. Many librarians noted that students are increasingly using public libraries for computer and Internet access, not necessarily for research or homework help. This observation is supported by these comments: “Reading is decreasing. Use of the internet is huge.” Another librarian noted that “we see loads of students every day as we are located very close to an alternative high school. However, the only obvious use these students make of this library is accessing chat lines on the public access computers. There are seldom if ever requests for help with actual school assignments.” The data from this study also indicate that librarians perceive students are accessing more information online than from print resources. One librarian noted that “we don’t usually get many students here as they get their info from school computers.” Another stated that student use of the library seems to be decreasing “because more and more people have computers at home and the students

use them and don't bother going to the library." On the other hand, some study participants noted that many teachers are now requiring students to access and use information from both print and electronic sources, which means that student use of the public library is on the upswing in some communities.

### ***Assignments and Information Literacy***

The final category that emerged from the data is the kinds of assignments students are using public library resources for and information literacy. One question in the survey and interviews asked librarians to describe the kinds of assignments children are working on when they come to the public library. Responses were varied and included book reports or novel studies, science fair projects, heritage fair projects, recreational reading, and research projects. Topics for research projects were also varied and included: explorers, biography, animals, social issues, environment, biomes, life cycles, Ancient Egypt or Greece, and countries. Some respondents elaborated on the kinds of projects being done by students in the public library. For example,

most students who come in are looking for help in the area of Social Studies—research projects—mostly at an elementary level but a few at middle school level. Not much call for help with science or math other than Science Fair type books. We also have high school students coming in to borrow books that are on their English reading lists and they are sometimes looking for books concerning English assignments.

A recurring comment about types of projects and access to information in both the survey and interview data was the role of parents in finding information for children's assignments. Similarly, participants in our study mentioned the last minute nature of many parental and student requests for help. "Parents of children usually come through our doors in a panic and need the resources, NOW! We have more resources available through our regional system than we would have at our location, so often we have to be creative in finding information for research projects." Another respondent stated that "many students leave research assignments to the very last minute and come in a panic to the library with unrealistic expectations that we have scads of information and resources readily available for them." Similarly, many public libraries appear to be the second stop for many students seeking information for school projects. As one respondent noted, "most students come to the public library after they have exhausted the school library resources." Similarly, "I think they try the school library first and then come to the public library if their resources are depleted on a specific topic." On the other hand, another librarian noted that children are usually "looking for the bulk of their information here, rather than finding it at their school library since resources are fewer with budgets being as low as they are."

Participants in this study were also asked to describe the process that children tend to use when they are working on a research project. Not surprisingly, responses indicated a diverse approach to the research process. Some librarians noted that children come to the public library with well formulated topics or questions or with a specific information need. Others, however, suggested that children are not being taught how to narrow down

a topic to make it a manageable research question. One respondent also noted that children do not always even understand what the assignment is asking them to do: “at times I have had to ‘translate’ just what is being asked.” Information literacy was another concern expressed in the survey responses. Students using the public library “do not seem to have much experience with searching online, most of them go straight to Google and have no idea that the information might not be reliable.” Comments such as this seem to indicate that many students are struggling with information literacy skills when they come to the public library to find resources for research projects and other assignments.

## **Discussion**

This study revealed that many public libraries are struggling to establish and maintain relationships with schools and teachers in their communities. Bundy (2006) and Hart (2006a) both identified that increased awareness and changes in attitude were required in order for schools, public libraries, and administrators to build and maintain these kinds of partnerships. One participant suggested that “competition from the school library” is the barrier that prevents the public library from improving service for students.

This idea of competition between libraries may be exacerbated by the current challenges facing all libraries in Alberta, especially declining budgets and staffing levels. In spite of this, some of the librarians that participated in this study indicated that they were trying to find ways to better work with the schools in their communities. For example, a few libraries have created a homework help club or centre staffed by volunteers and/or regular library staff members for students to make use of in the evenings and weekends. Other libraries have pathfinders (both print and electronic) based on curriculum topics for students to refer to when they are doing research and some libraries (especially the larger suburban libraries we interviewed) present workshops for classes introducing them to public library resources. Even if direct collaboration with schools is difficult, many public libraries in Alberta are trying to develop programs and services that are accessible and useful to all the students in their communities.

Similarly, for many teachers in Alberta, like those described by Bundy (2006), the public library is their only source of resources because of the current crisis in school libraries. Providing access to print and electronic resources to both of these non-traditional user groups is forcing public libraries to expand their current levels of service and change their collection development practices. Serving the information needs of both general public library users and classroom teachers stretches already limited public library resources and restricts what is available to students who use the library individually.

With the implementation of a new, inquiry-based social studies curriculum in Alberta, this trend is likely to continue. The new curriculum emphasizes “active inquiry and critical and creative thinking” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 2) which requires students and teachers to have access to a wide range of print and electronic resources. In addition, students need the information literacy skills to effectively identify their information need, locate the required information, and evaluate its appropriateness. As this new curriculum becomes more firmly entrenched in Alberta’s schools, students will



be relying on public library resources and services even more for their information needs. Hart (2000; 2003) and Bundy (2002) similarly found that shifts in the national curricula of both South Africa and Australia to inquiry and resource-based approaches required public libraries to change their approaches to programs and services for children. As a supplement to, or in some cases a replacement for, school libraries and teacher librarians in Alberta, public libraries are increasingly being forced into supporting the school curricula.

Electronic resources, which are widely available to public library patrons working in the library and from home, also create challenges. Students want to use electronic resources like databases or websites, and may be required by their teachers to consult these sources, but are often lacking the skills and training to effectively identify and evaluate appropriate online information. Hart (2006c) and Bundy (2006) both identify this lack of information literacy as a major problem facing libraries in their studies. In this study of Alberta public libraries, respondents noted that students often do not have a clear idea of what they need to do to complete the assignment, nor do they know how to effectively search for the best information. As one librarian stated, "I find that very often they don't know how to get the information they are looking for from the source." The result is that public library staff members are called on to assist students in locating appropriate information (Hart, 2006a).

For public libraries to continue to provide service to students, they need more funding and higher levels of staffing. Support from the schools through collaboration and communication and an increased presence of qualified teacher-librarians would also help to ensure that students are receiving the best possible education. It is also critical that public libraries provide their staff members with professional development and training related to information literacy and research skills (Hart, 2006b). As one librarian in this study suggested that "more training in research would probably save a great deal of time and frustration for myself and the students I serve."

## **Implications & Conclusion**

The findings from this study show that public libraries in Alberta are taking on many of the roles and responsibilities of school libraries. Public libraries are supporting the children's research and homework assignments by purchasing curriculum-related materials and providing formal and informal training to children and their parents in the library, in schools, and online. Providing pathfinders, creating virtual library websites with links and information, creating homework help desks, and developing collections of print and other media for student use are all examples of ways in which public libraries across Alberta are providing high levels of service to children and young adults in their communities.

Public libraries and their staff members are providing this additional level of service without additional funds and often, with no formal training on the curriculum, information literacy, or inquiry-based learning. It appears that public library staff members would benefit from professional development opportunities in these areas so that they are able to continue providing high levels of service to children across Alberta.

This study indicates that Alberta's public libraries are taking on more responsibilities that require resources, training, and time, all of which are often in limited supply. Although the libraries that participated in this study seem hopeful about the future and eager to provide high levels of service to all the children in their communities, the authors of this paper have several concerns. First, public library staff members are not trained/qualified to take on the educational role of a teacher and or teacher-librarian. Second, the public library should be providing supplemental resources and services to teachers and children rather than "taking the place of the school library" as one librarian commented. Third, public librarians are taking on these roles without professional development or a clear understanding of inquiry-based learning and the curriculum and how those have an impact on the needs of children and teachers. Fourth, governments should recognize the need for both strong school library programs and public libraries that meet the recreational and informational needs of an entire community. There needs to be adequate support and clear guidelines, planning, and expectations so that public and school libraries can work together to provide the best programs and services for children.

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