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The Impact of Highly Qualified Teacher-Librarians in BC

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Abstract

The qualifications a teacher-librarian in British Columbia (BC) can vary based on their level of education, training and experience. The qualifications can range from a master's degree in library and information studies, teacher-librarianship diploma, teacher-librarianship certificate, to no formal education. There is substantial literature on the significance of having highly qualified, full-time teacher-librarians at schools, but most of the current literature exists outside of BC. The definition of what highly qualified means is often very vague. This review will explore the existing literature on teacher-librarian qualifications to consider the need for further research into teacher-librarian qualifications in BC—specifically distinguishing how different levels of qualifications correlate with the teacher-librarian's level of impact on their respective school communities, leading to more evidence and support for the need for more highly qualified teacher-librarians in BC.

Keywords: teacher-librarians, school libraries, British Columbia, training, education, qualifications

There is significant research on the value of qualified and certified teacher-librarians (TLs) and how they enhance and contribute to student achievement. There is also research which supports the importance of collaborative and supportive relationships between TLs and school teachers, as well as administrative staff to foster a school environment that is most conducive to student learning. However, most of the literature does not explicitly define what a "highly qualified" TL means. Often the literature that discusses a TLs' impact on student

achievement, makes assumptions of the qualifications of the TL. Most of the current relevant literature on TLs exists outside of British Columbia (BC), with the most recent BC study being published over a decade ago by Haycock (2011). The last published statistics on TLs from Statistics Canada were published approximately two decades ago by Coish (2005). This review aims to identify the gaps in TL research to advocate for updated statistics on TLs in BC. It also aims to distinguish between differing levels of TL qualifications (master's degree, diploma, certificate) commonly attained by TLs in BC, and their subsequent level of impact on their respective school communities.

The TL's Role: Presence of Highly Qualified, Full-Time Teacher-Librarian

Most of the literature on school libraries reinforces the significant impact that a full-time, highly qualified TL can make in schools. Most notably, Lance and Kachel (2018) point out that having a full-time, certified TL consistently positively correlates with student achievement in schools, regardless of external factors such as socioeconomic influences, demographics, funding, teacher-student ratios, or teacher qualifications. TLs need to be highly qualified to have full impact on their school communities since the breadth and multi-faceted nature of their role requires specialized training and education (Kaplan, 2007). In general, a TL is responsible for running and managing the library as an administrator, while also being "a teacher, instructional partner, and an information specialist" (Kaplan, 2007, p. 301).

The Role of Library Organizations

Library organizations like International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2015) and Canadian School Libraries (CSL) (2023) also respectively emphasize that effective school libraries must be staffed by a qualified TL. While IFLA (2015) states that a TL requires "formal education in school librarianship and classroom teaching" (p. 25), CSL (2023) lists a variety of education levels as examples of "qualifications in teacher-librarianship" (p. 26). Neither further clarifies what highly qualified means, nor do they distinguish between these different levels of education.

Furthermore, despite this extensive research and fundamental documentation regarding the necessity of having a highly qualified, full-time TL in school libraries, the available statistics show otherwise.

Definitions

A school library as defined in the *IFLA School Library Guidelines* is, "a school's physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to students' information-to-knowledge journey and to their personal, social, and cultural growth" (IFLA, 2015, p. 16). In BC, school libraries are also known as library learning commons (LLC).

TLs can be defined as the information professionals who are responsible for the school library (IFLA, 2015). Teacher-librarian is the most common term used in BC, which reflects the dual qualifications of the role: "a qualified, licensed teacher who has additional qualifications in teacher-librarianship" (Canadian School Libraries, 2023, p. 25). Additional terms such as school librarians or school media specialists are also often used. In contrast to TLs, learning commons teachers are certified teachers with no formal library training who are assigned to run and manage the school library when there is no TL in place (Canadian School Libraries, 2023). Additional school library staff include library technicians and library clerks. Library technicians must complete a library technician diploma, whereas library clerk positions do not usually require any education requirements.

In the context of TLs, qualifications refer to the level of education and/or training required of teachers to become a TL in BC. In BC, TLs must first be certified teachers, and their positions are filled according to provincial and district policies (Coquitlam Teachers' Association, 2016). Seniority and necessary qualifications determine hiring, with seniority taking precedence, while the necessary qualifications are kept vague and open-ended (Coquitlam Teachers' Association, 2016).

The terms training and education are often used interchangeably. Alpha Logic Career College (2022) defines training as being more short-term and specific, providing students with practical skills for a specific job, whereas education is more long-term and broader, providing theoretical knowledge for a career usually occurring in a formal setting

such as a school or college. Therefore, for the purposes of this review, education will refer to formal certification from a library program. In BC, the level of education can vary and will be explored throughout this study: a Master's in Library and Information Studies (MLIS), a Teacher-Librarianship Diploma, and a Teacher-Librarianship Certificate. The difference between the diploma and certificate is mainly in the number of required credits. A Teacher-Librarianship Diploma requires candidates to complete thirty credits (ten courses) whereas the Teacher-Librarianship Certificate requires them to complete fifteen credits (five courses) (UBC, n. d.). Training will refer to professional development workshops, conferences, and other relevant in-service training usually hosted by school districts or organizations like the BCTLA (British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' Association).

TLs: The Context Outside of BC

In the US, despite all states having certification requirements for their TLs, a specific school or district can "[opt] not to hire certified library media specialists" (Kaplan, 2007, p. 301). Likewise, Merga (2019) also notes that many public schools in Australia and the US are now "no longer required to employ teacher librarians or school librarians" (p. 14).

A study conducted in the state of Missouri in the United States, found that schools with higher full-time equivalent (FTE) TLs had higher state-assessment proficiency rates (Burress et al., 2023). Burress et al. (2023) emphasizes the discrepancy between this data and the reality, as "prior to summer 2022, Missouri has long allowed classroom teachers to 'test-in' to school librarian jobs without any coursework" (p. 13). Even though many of Missouri's neighbouring states require a master's degree to work in school libraries, the Missouri Advisory Council of Certification for Educators (MACCE) "would block any master's degree requirement for school librarian certification" (Burress et al., 2023, pp. 13-14).The ultimate decision was to require four library courses and a test in order to be a certified TL (Burress et al., 2023, pp. 13-14). This begs the question of whether Missouri's requirements, and therefore definition of a qualified TL are enough, and whether such a TL would make a full impact on their school community. And by extension, what level of education and/or training is sufficient?

Language holds power, and the fact that different literature, different sources, and different geographic locations will use different terms to signify TL is not only confusing but can be intentional. Merga (2019) notes that the title a librarian "may be reflective of a range of specialties and qualifications which they may hold", hence TL being the preferred term to clearly demonstrate the dual qualifications of a teacher and librarian (p. 3). Merga (2019) also indicates that the debate for different names for librarians also represents a deeper and larger issue of uncertainty around who a librarian really is and what they really do.

TLs: The Context in BC

The situation in the United States is no different in Canada. The last report on TLs that was published by Statistics Canada was from 2003/04: each school across Canada had an average of 0.25 full-time equivalent TL with BC's average being a bit higher at 0.48, meaning that on average there was less than one part-time TL in BC schools (Coish, 2005).

A more recent BC study looked at the relationship between the presence of a TL and student achievement. Haycock's (2011) findings align with prior research on the positive correlation between full-time TLs and student achievement, finding that high performing schools had a TL staffed for 29.2 hours per week, versus 18.3 hours per week at low performing schools. The mean found at BC schools was 23.7 hours per week—assuming a 40-hour work week as full-time (teachers and TLs often work well beyond this, with 54 hours being an average [Najarro, 2022]). This means that according to Haycock's sample size, there was an average of 0.59 full-time equivalent TL in BC schools. Although this appears to be an improvement from the 2003/04 statistics, this is far from having one full-time qualified TL in each school library. Haycock (2011) concludes that "in BC, as elsewhere, it would seem the roles and responsibilities traditionally undertaken collaboratively by the teacher-librarian have been relegated to classroom teachers alone through design or neglect." This is despite the years of recommendations for full-time qualified TLs. Therefore, it is valid to "conclude that classroom teachers are not receiving the training and support they need to carry out mandated initiatives" (p. 47). The most recent statistics found on TLs in BC

were from 2014-15, indicating that TLs in BC public schools have been reduced by more than one-third (Beaudry, 2017).

Learning Commons Teachers and Unqualified TLs

So, the question is, if BC school libraries are not run by full-time, qualified TLs, then what roles are managing them? The answer is not fully clear and requires further research. Some preliminary answers can be gleaned from the Statistics Canada 2003/04 data: 94.7% of all schools in BC (with a national average of 93.3%) had a school library, meaning that there were some schools without a school library, let alone a TL (Coish, 2005). School libraries could also be staffed by a learning commons teacher, or be run by a library technician, who are formally trained in the library, but are not a certified teacher nor librarian. In 2003/04, there was an average of 0.03 teacher-non-librarian, 0.10 library technician, 0.22 clerical staff per BC school library; however, the data on teacher-non-librarian is marked as less reliable (Coish, 2005).

In BC, and elsewhere, there is a movement towards rebranding school libraries as library learning commons (LLC). According to the Fleming Learning Commons' website (an elementary school located in Vancouver), they distinguish the difference between a school library and an LLC as "taking school libraries into the 21st century" (Reierson & Davies, 2023). Hence, identifying the perspective that school libraries are old and outdated. This rebranding of school libraries as learning commons, and the assignment of learning commons teachers to run them, where they are not certified librarians is alarming (CSL, 2023).

Establishing the roles of TLs with Educators: A TLs Influence on Teaching Literacy

Teaching literacy is a widely known aspect of a TL's job. Due to the undervaluing of TLs by school administration staff, the library is often the first to be affected by budget cuts in order to prioritize the classrooms (Hartzell, 2002). However, the irony is that in doing so, the efficacy of student learning in classrooms are being significantly affected as well (Hartzell, 2002). It is essential that administration understand the valued role of

TLs and that “cutting numbers of teacher librarians in schools puts at risk students’ literacy attainment” (Merga, 2019, p. 224). Moreover, Merga (2019) argues that the misunderstanding of the roles of TLs is connected to the devaluing of reading engagement.

Beyond reading and writing, information and digital literacies are becoming increasingly important. Highly qualified TLs with their dual qualifications, expertise, and leadership roles, can support teachers in understanding emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (GAI) (Oddone et al., 2023). Many teachers are concerned and wary of the rapid increase of GAI and impacts on students’ education (Oddone et al., 2023). Schools are the ideal, most structured environment for students to engage with GAI in intentional, productive, informed, and ethical ways (Oddone et al., 2023), with TLs being well equipped to teach these skills. TLs can also collaborate with teachers in curricular planning and co-teaching to help redesign learning and assessment tasks that can still be valid and valuable with GAI.

Establishing the Roles of TLs with Educators: Collaboration with Teachers

An important aspect of teacher librarianship is the collaboration between the TL and school teachers, with an especially effective type of collaboration being co-teaching. Co-teaching has been found to encourage and increase student learning and achievement, since about half of students were likely to meet or exceed the teacher’s expectations when teaching alone however, this number increases to 70 to 100% of students when TL and school teachers are co-teaching (Loertscher, 2014). Montiel-Overall (2005) developed a continuum of four models (A through D) to demonstrate TL and teacher collaboration, from “relatively insignificant” to “deep intellectual involvement and intense commitment” (p. 32). The last two models on the continuum, C and D, respectively representing “Integrated Instruction” and “Integrated Curriculum”, have the “greatest effect on student learning” (Montiel-Overall, 2005, p. 40). Within the continuum of collaboration, co-teaching would be categorized under the integrated instruction model.

"Deep trust" and "expertise recognized" are among the required attributes listed in the last two models but are not in the first two models (Montiel-Overall, 2005, p. 39). In schools that have low levels of collaboration then, what causes this lack of deep trust or not recognizing expertise? Naturally there can be a multitude of answers, but the qualifications, and therefore competencies, of the TL could be one of them. Montiel-Overall (2005) simply states that it is crucial that the "professional librarian" at a school is involved in curricular planning, so that the library is fully "integrated into schoolwide curriculum and instruction" (p. 32). However, Montiel-Overall (2005) does not further clarify what a "professional librarian" means and what qualifications would be needed to be deemed "professional" and capable of facilitating higher levels of collaboration.

Implied in Montiel-Overall's statement regarding the involvement of TLs in curricular planning, is that TLs should take on a leadership role in the school. Koh et al.'s (2022) study who looked at the co-teaching between TLs and school teachers emphasizes that, "librarians not only mentored and scaffolded for students, but also for teachers" (pp. 24-25). Many of their interview transcripts with both teachers and TLs reinforced Montiel-Overall's attribute of recognizing the TL's expertise, and therefore, role as a school leader (Koh et al., 2022). However, it is not just the teachers' recognition of the TL's expertise that leads to effective collaboration in schools. In addition to the leadership provided by TLs, school administrative staff hold significant responsibility in creating a collaborative culture.

Establishing the Roles of TLs with Educators: Administration Perception of TLs

Many studies emphasize the pivotal difference that administration can make in either fostering a productive culture towards collaboration between TLs and teachers or creating barriers that discourage it (Koh et al., 2022; Loh et al., 2021; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Montiel-Overall & Jones, 2011; Oberg, 2006). The main reason that is cited for this lack of support from administration is often that they do not know what TLs actually do. Most of their knowledge of TLs come from their own personal experiences with TLs (Kaplan, 2007). The source of their personal experiences comes from their own K-12 education, as there is no explicit training or education on TLs for administration

(Hartzell, 2002). As Hartzwell (2002) highlights, most school principals are around the age of 49, meaning that it has been many decades for principals since they were students themselves, so their perceptions of TLs are most likely long-solidified stereotype. Wang & Pollock (2020) also affirms that the median age of is around 49 in BC.

There are substantial consequences to this misunderstanding of TLs. By not understanding the roles of TLs and school libraries, TLs are not being provided adequate opportunities for collaboration. As a result, “opportunities to make a real difference at work are reduced” (Hartzell, 2002, p. 103). Thus, TLs often get pushed into other roles, like technology coordination or covering preparation time for other teachers (Hartzell, 2002). As the administration is responsible for the hiring decisions for TLs, this can impact who they deem qualified to run the library, as well as the budget and funding for school libraries.

A vicious cycle is then formed, in which the “inattention and undervaluing [of qualified TLs]” both causes, and are consequences of, school libraries in “many schools [being] operated by people not trained in the field” (Hartzell, 2002, p. 104). This leads to an “occupational invisibility” for the profession of TLs, which is “exacerbated by the low levels of librarianship education within the profession” (Oberg, 2006, p. 14). Oberg (2006) affirms, “when some members of a professional group lack appropriate professional education, their potential clientele are unsure about what to expect in expertise and quality of service, and the image and status of the whole group suffer from this uncertainty” (p. 14). Therefore, the deep trust and recognition of the expertise is lost, not just between TLs and teachers, but also between TLs and administration. In order to resolve this and gain both respect and support of their principals, Oberg (2002) asserts that TLs must “build their credibility as experts in the field of teacher-librarianship,” which not only means that they need to be dually qualified in education and librarianship, but as school leaders, “should have the same level of education as other leaders in the school; in most schools and school districts, school leaders are expected to have master’s degrees” (p. 16). Dr. Oberg, a Canadian researcher and professor on school librarianship explicitly states that the level of education a TL should have is a master’s degree, implying that even a teacher-librarianship diploma or

certificate may not be sufficient in order to be acknowledged and respected as a school leader (Oberg, 2002).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Extensive research has shown that highly qualified, full-time TLs have the greatest impact on student achievement in schools. Deep trust, respect, and recognition of the expertise of TLs from both teachers and administration are needed to create a productive school environment that allows the TL to be able to make full impact. Despite this, the literature and statistics indicate that most schools do not have a full-time, highly qualified TL running their school libraries. Furthermore, there is a lack of clear definitions within the existing literature of what “highly qualified” means. As there are varying levels of formal education and training available for TLs, this only further contributes to the confusion of administration, teachers, and even aspiring TLs from fully understanding the role and significance of a TL in a school. To ensure TLs can fulfill their leadership roles in schools, TL qualifications should be clearly defined and include a master’s degree in school librarianship. This would allow aspiring TLs to acquire the education and training needed to be successful in their positions, and to be fully recognized for their expertise.

The contradiction between the research and reality of the presence of highly qualified TLs indicates that there are barriers in the system that need to be investigated further. Further research into the different TL education levels in BC, from certificates, diplomas to a master’s degree should also be considered. Additionally, more current and in-depth research regarding qualifications of TLs in BC is required since the available research is outdated. This would provide much-needed data to support evidence-based decisions regarding the hiring of TLs, funding for school libraries, and ways to support teachers in pursuing higher education and librarianship to ensure that TLs in BC can have an opportunity to make a full impact on their school communities.

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