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Driving Change: Creating a Policy Brief to Position the School Library as a Hub for Global Citizenship

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Abstract

The policy brief is an instrument that can be used both in the workplace and in educational settings to tie knowledge to a call for action. This paper reflects on an MLIS candidate's experience of creating a policy brief to call on school libraries to become key players in promoting peaceful societies. This paper outlines the context in which the policy brief was created, offers a reflection on the learning experience of writing a policy brief, and includes the policy brief itself. The brief begins by contextualizing a particular public school board, Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) in Canada, as one whose policies aim to serve a diverse population. Canada is a multicultural nation with the highest population growth of the G7 countries and immigration accounting for two-thirds of that growth. This paper argues that the library, with social justice values at its core, is well situated to enable EPS to move toward such a vision, but that current EPS policy has not protected libraries. The brief argues that EPS should commit to ensuring that every school has a library, staffed with an LIS-trained teacher-librarian. The overarching goal of the brief is to demonstrate that school libraries can become a hub for global citizenship that facilitates and spearheads a drive for social justice in Edmonton's children and youth—the leaders of tomorrow.

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Introduction

Every Wednesday evening throughout the winter of 2017, in the cold and dark of one of Canada's northernmost cities, a small group gathered in a small room to turn our focus to the wider world. We had each been drawn to LIS 598: Information & Libraries in the International Context for our own reasons, but together we would navigate this course that included in its objectives the goal of "gain[ing] knowledge of the major issues affecting information organizations and libraries in the international context" (Dali, 2017, p. 1). Our professor, Dr. Keren Dali, encouraged us to "think globally rather than locally" (2017, p. 2) and ensured that our interaction with this topic would not be limited to conversations within our small circle but would extend to "experiential projects" whereby we would "contribute to the international LIS community" (p. 2). To this end, one of our assignments was the creation of a policy brief with the goal of publication, thereby directing our focus toward conversation with that international community.

Our policy briefs were meant to position libraries "as key institutions in driving change across the spectrum of social, political, cultural, and educational spheres," and demonstrate that

libraries are "considered pivotal in ensuring progress in priority areas outlined by the UN" (Dali, 2017, p. 20), including progress in the development of peaceful societies. I began this assignment with eyes glazed, my mind a blank. Unlike many of those in my class, I had no library work experience, and the word "policy" made my mind fog up like glasses when I come in from the cold. Writing policy briefs was not what I had signed up for! But that phrase—"educational spheres"—was something I could speak to. I am a mature student in the University of Alberta's MLIS program, and I came to this program after many years of working as a classroom teacher. I have taught in K-12 schools in Canada and internationally, most recently in Edmonton, Canada. When I pictured the challenges of peace, I could see the challenges of working through conflict with students in my classroom. Peace is not just a challenge for those who are "over there." Perhaps, I realized, I could tie this challenge of developing peaceful societies to the very local context of the public school, focussing on the school library as a key institution, to use Dali's terminology, that could drive change in the educational sphere.

Allowing my professional background to have bearing on this class assignment enabled me to bring into focus issues that I had been thinking about directly or indirectly for years. I found that the task of writing a policy brief helped me articulate a problem and identify some specifics of what can be done and why. It invited me to shape a ball of vague dissatisfaction and powerlessness into pointed engagement. Reconciling my ideas with the format of a policy brief, as opposed to an essay, urged me to tie reflection with action.

I hope that this policy brief will provide an example for students, educators, and practitioners of the way in which this format of writing can be used to merge global, far-reaching concerns with the immediacy of a specific workplace. For practitioners, the policy brief can be a proactive tool with which to nudge along change; for educators and students, policy briefs provide an intermediary between theory and practice, helping writers tether ideas to known circumstances.

What follows is the text of my policy brief, "The Library as a Hub for Global Citizenship in Edmonton Public Schools," as written for the class assignment but reformatted for the needs of this journal. At the conclusion of the brief, I have provided reflections on the learning process and challenges of writing the brief.

Policy Brief: The Library as a Hub for Global Citizenship in Edmonton Public Schools (EPS)

Big changes start with small steps. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #16 begins, "promote peaceful and inclusive societies" (IFLA, n.d.). Much of this work can begin at home, at the local level. For many children and young people in Edmonton, their classrooms already reflect significant global diversity. In Canada—a country where immigration accounted for the majority its population growth from 2011–2016—the city of Edmonton had the second-highest growth rate in the nation (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Recent immigration projections suggest that by 2036, almost one-half of Canadians could be an immigrant or a child of an immigrant (Statistics Canada, 2017a). In this multicultural context, if children and young people can begin to work toward peaceful and inclusive societies within their classrooms, they are catching a glimpse of what peace might look like around the world.

Edmonton Public Schools

The school district in Edmonton is the sixth largest in the country and the second largest in Alberta. In 2016–2017, 95,642 students enrolled in Edmonton public schools, and the district had an operating budget of $1,122 billion (EPS, 2013b). EPS is an innovator in education, leading the way in its unique approach to school selection: as a "district of choice," families are not limited by geographic boundaries, but can choose to send their children to any school in the district. Further, decision-making is decentralized, and each school is unique in its instructional focus; for example, schools can focus on arts, sports, or language-learning, with the principal leading the school in its implementation of that focus.

However, many school libraries are without a teacher-librarian, and the quality and use of library resources varies widely from school to school. Although EPS policy is supportive of the "library learning commons" (EPS, 2011), it is vague in its guidelines; combine this with a structure that relegates decisions to principals regarding how and whether to invest in the structure, function, and resources of individual school libraries, and it is little wonder that school libraries are disappearing.

However, as befitting a school district that serves a diverse population, EPS policies are far-reaching:

- EPS is "focused on ensuring each student … develops the ability, passion and imagination to … contribute to their community" (EPS, 2013a).
- EPS's stated vision is to transform "the learners of today into the leaders of tomorrow" (EPS, 2014a).
- The goal of EPS is "to enable all students to … be Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit" and to "demonstrate global and cultural understanding" (EPS, 2014b).

These goals and aims suggest many building blocks of peace. However, they become diluted when spread across a curriculum that divides learning into discrete subject areas and across schools that differ widely in their instructional focus. What is needed is a mechanism by which these goals and aims can come together across all grades, all subject areas, and all schools. The library can provide this mechanism.

The Library as a Hub

Visualizing the hub

Think of the school environment as a wheel. If each spoke of the wheel represents the work done in disparate classrooms, the library can be seen as the hub that joins that work together and makes it possible for the wheel to move forward.

Making connections

The learning environment should be designed to help students see that global and cultural understanding is not limited to a particular project for a particular class. Because teacher-librarians are non-specialists and work with teachers across all grades, they can facilitate

connections across grades and curricula. In some guidelines, such as those for the International Baccalaureate program, the importance of these connections is not only encouraged but also clearly stated in the curriculum; however, it is up to the teacher to make those connections. The teacher-librarian can guide teachers in finding the points of intersection.

Facilitating service learning

As the hub that connects many curricular spokes, and as an inclusive commons for students, the library is well situated to facilitate service learning. An example of service learning could be an instance when "science students collect and analyze water samples, document their results, and present findings to a local pollution control agency" (PeaceJam, n.d.); this helps students move from learning toward applied learning *and doing*. The teacher-librarian could assist in planning service learning, also enabling science teachers to see the tie-ins to, for example, persuasive writing in the language arts curriculum. This connection between writing, science, and service could move students toward relevant, meaningful learning.

From gathering resources to creating new content

As an information specialist, the teacher-librarian is able to efficiently gather and organize relevant information. The teacher-librarian is a potential source of carefully selected materials on which the teacher can rely when planning learning activities. This is essential because, as has been suggested, "culturally diverse children's print and digital materials can be used to first foster cultural competence in students and then motivate them to engagement in social justice activities" (Naidoo & Sweeney, 2015, p. 199).

Further, in a multicultural context, the school librarian can provide opportunities for empowerment by enabling students to create multicultural content for the school library. As a wordsmith and media specialist, the school librarian can enable students' "own capacity to create and disseminate content so that [their] voices can be heard" (Lor, 2016, p. 29). Also, not limited to working with a particular age group, the library could be a place where older students mentor younger students in crafting their own content; this will further contribute to the sense of community and relationship building within the school.

Effecting change

Exposure to print and digital materials alone does not necessarily lead students to take action. Rather, students need to engage in dialogue about how they "can realistically effect change that will make a step towards righting the injustice" (Naidoo & Sweeney, 2015, p. 199). The teacher-librarian is also a potential source of relevant research on current pedagogy; for instance, Kathy Bickmore, a researcher in Ontario, highlights the challenge of bringing authentic discussions of conflict to the classroom and outlines "key elements" that increase teachers' capacity for engaging students in a dialogue that makes space for marginalized voices (Bickmore, 2014, p. 553). By working together, the teacher and teacher-librarian can ensure that both the materials and the pedagogy work in tandem toward a goal of motivating the school community to effect change.

Space for contradictions

John Ralston Saul, writer and essayist, suggests that within Canada there is "[s]pace for multiple identities and multiple loyalties, … for *an idea of belonging which is comfortable with*

contradictions" (Foran, 2017, para. 24; emphasis mine). Learning to be comfortable with contradictions does not come by default, but it is a crucial element of peacebuilding dialogues (Bickmore, 2014). Edmonton public school classrooms, populated with students with diverse backgrounds, attitudes, and opinions, seemingly offer an ideal context for sustained, "mutual engagement with contrasting and conflicting perspectives" (Bickmore, 2014, p. 554). However, while some classrooms may move toward this ideal, the very "school system context … may constrain implementation of dialogic pedagogies addressing conflict" (Bickmore, 2014, p. 555).

The staffed school library, although located within the school building, provides a somewhat autonomous space. Not strictly bound by curricular guidelines, but not detached from the learning resources either, it offers a more neutral and less hegemonic space for students to engage in dialogue and to extend conversations beyond the classroom.

Community connections

School librarians are well positioned to connect one school to another, for example, by taking turns hosting events and connecting student participants from different schools. Of course, school libraries do not exist in a vacuum, and many peace-building roles are played by community services already in place, such as the local public library. In Edmonton, for example, Edmonton Public Library (EPL) already engages in many peace-building initiatives suggested by Lor (2016): informing, promoting, educating, creating resources, empowering, healing, and advocating for peace (pp. 27–30). However, school libraries are unique in the space they inhabit; that is, their placement within school buildings makes them highly visible to every young person who attends that school. School and public libraries could work together to make programs and speakers easily accessible to young people, bringing resources into the space of the school library.

The school library could also connect students to resources beyond their city and school, such as those available through PeaceJam, an international program "committed to positive change in [young leaders], their communities, and the world" (PeaceJam, 2016). This visionary program introduces young people to Nobel Peace laureates, helping youth learn from others and become "knowledgeable contributors to their community" (Blackwell, 2006, p. 33). It relies on school libraries and librarians to improve publicity, act as student advisors, and engage teachers and students in program activities.

Working together with classroom teachers, as well as service providers in the broader community, school libraries could become the hub that brings together children and young adults with resources that empower them to become, in the words of EPS, Ethical Citizens who contribute to their communities and leaders who strive for peace.

Recommendations

Goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely; "SMART" is an acronym well known to goal-setters (Rathi, 2017). This policy brief would have EPS look closely at their goal "to enable all students to … be Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit" and to "demonstrate global and cultural understanding" (EPS, 2014b) and ask whether it is indeed a SMART goal in the context of the current school structure. To make this goal "achievable," it is recommended that EPS align it with the work of the school library and be "specific," not vague, in outlining the role of the library as learning commons. It is also recommended that EPS enlist the help of trained teacher-librarians in achieving and

measuring this goal and that it allocate a fraction of its $1,122 billion operating budget to build a library infrastructure rather than leaving the decision of whether or how to run a school library to individual school principals. Already a leader in its approach to "choice," it is recommended that EPS make the bold choice of clarifying the role of the school library and formalizing its support. In doing so, EPS could transform the school library from a holding place for Scholastic serials and out-of-date dinosaurs into a hub for global citizenship.

Writing a Policy Brief as a Learning Process

As this was the first policy brief I had written, I had some uncertainty as to whether or not my writing style and focus matched the goals of the format. I tried to be clear in what I saw as the main issue but, on the one hand, my writing felt rather heavy-handed and overly obvious. It was also challenging to bring together the different threads to articulate and support my beliefs that the education of children and young people is intimately tied to the possibility of peace in the world; that the school library is an integral part of such an education; and that what happens in EPS is relevant in a global context.

The scope of this policy brief was limited to providing a rationale for making the school library a central hub. As such, I did not consider the details of how EPS should financially support school libraries. I decided to cite the $1 billion figure to emphasize my point that EPS has vast resources at its disposal, but I left out the actual details of how EPS might allocate those funds. These are limitations of this brief as it currently stands.

It was also challenging to find the right balance between being comprehensive and being selective. I cited and listed more references than I found in some sample policy briefs, so perhaps I was not selective enough. However, I felt that including a range of references was important for making a persuasive case and building up the multiple threads of my argument.

In the end, I found that I enjoyed the challenge of tying a theoretical argument to the specifics and realities of a familiar workplace. Also, it was an assignment requirement that we format the brief as a visually appealing document using basic publishing and graphic design tools, and I enjoyed the freedom of using visual design aspects to sharpen my argument.

Conclusion

Collaborating on policy development in the context of the workplace could enable practitioners to work together to address the need for change. Writing a policy brief does not have to be a lonely task; if I had worked on my brief with colleagues who had complementary skills and backgrounds, we might have been able to include, for example, specific suggestions for EPS on how to restructure its finances to enable the work of school libraries. The usefulness of policy briefs could also extend to the realm of public and academic libraries. As knowledgeable practitioners invested in their communities, public and academic librarians impact the economic, educational, and social spheres, with the American Library Association (ALA, 2018) identifying over 24 areas in which libraries make a difference. Policy briefs, with their well-supported, specific, and clear arguments, support a drive for change and provide an effective means of engagement. As such, they can serve as a proactive tool to instigate and sustain change.

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