

# Fractured Fairy Tales: Or, You Want To Do What To The Library...?

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“Talk to me about your library...” and what followed is actually the end to this short story ...so please, dear reader, allow me to start at the beginning where a tale normally begins...

Once upon a time a beautiful young princess was curled up on her bed reading poetry...Oh, who am I kidding?

It was just me in my jeans and sweatshirt sitting at my kitchen table catching up on my reading homework (professional journals), and I happened to read an article (Montgomery & Vleck, 2004) about classroom libraries in a school where a conscious decision was made not to have a central school library but, instead, to divide the library collection among all of the classrooms. This was a school where each classroom had 2 carts – one with fiction and one with nonfiction books (anything other than books were kept out of the hands of the children and only accessible to staff – stored in the workroom and staffroom). After my first reaction where my heart started to race uncontrollably, my blood pressure rising so that I could literally feel the blood coursing into my brain...I decided to calm down for fear of having a heart attack.

“Arrrgh...how could they possibly?!” I started to rant to anyone who would listen – (whether they wanted to or not!). No one was around, but both of my dogs dove under the sofa fearing for their safety. I then stopped... absolutely surprised and astonished at myself. How could I so quickly condemn those who are attempting to try something new and daring? I, who had always prided myself for being open to change...yes, even embracing change – often accused of demonstrating risk-seeking behaviours. Now I was acting like an old fuddy-duddy caught up in the past and unwilling to change?

Perhaps I had been too long out of the day-to-day work in schools (I have been in a central school district position for all of 2 years after having been a teacher-librarian and, most recently an administrator, in elementary and senior high schools for over 18 years). Maybe things had drastically changed in schools to such an extent that they no longer had the need for a central, vibrant, dynamic school library. Do our kids really need or, indeed, deserve a library in their school or not? Why bother, if having a few carts of books in their classroom would suffice? Is this something from the past? Am I stuck in the Dark Ages?

I then decided to take a trip out to my friend Linda's school, Hawkwood Elementary, and search out some answers to my questions. I planned to do some action research to

provide a bit of credibility to my gut feelings or ... rather, my love of fairytale endings? I gathered up my tools of research: my digital video camera and my pile of media release forms. I planned to interview a number of stakeholders who could provide me with some insights into their perceptions of the role of the library and the teacher-librarian and how (or if) those roles impact the teaching and learning in their school. I hoped I would glean from the videotapes significant comments related to my topic of study (stated in those dry, disinterested terms, it sure doesn't sound like any fairytale I know and love!).

Although I had been to Hawkwood a number of times over the past few years for various meetings and school related business, this visit was a fact-finding feat...no, actually it was more of a clue-collecting clamber (I know that the clever alliteration will not be lost on you, gentle reader). I needed to know if, indeed, a school still needs a library or would it be wiser to put that money (because it all comes down to the money, doesn't it?) elsewhere.

### **“Talk to me about your library...”**

...that was the open invitation that I gave to various administrators, teachers, students and parents at Hawkwood and, oh my goodness, they did talk...

Principal, Ivan Mihaljevich, and Teacher-Librarian, Linda Steen (full-time, flexibly scheduled), sat with me in the middle of their school's library talking with me while surrounded by individual kids busy choosing books, groups of kids at tables working on projects, other kids at computer pods busily working. One or two teachers were busy with kids in various corners of the library. Huge hand-painted murals at each end of the library beautifully depict the foothills and mountains of the Calgary countryside.

“We promote avid readership...life-long learning...independence...provide strategies for learning within an inquiry-based, resource-based learning environment.”

“Open door policy – kids are welcome to come at any time during the school day...any time that they need to with the permission of their teacher.”

“We do not do whole class book exchanges...doesn't make sense. When a kid needs a book or other resource that's when they come and get them.”

“Policy of Intellectual Freedom drives what we do...freedom of choice...”

“We respect and trust our kids...if you trust kids they will rise to the occasion...”

“We do very well on the provincial achievement scores...however this is not about achievement scores...we teach our students with the future in mind...”

...Directly supports our district vision...'Educating tomorrow's citizen today' – what better way to achieve that?”

### **"Talk to me about your library..."**

A parent, Janet, sits with me and quietly and enthusiastically tells me about the teams of parents and teachers and students who are involved in what happens in the library. "It is the centre of our learning community...kids are able to discover new and unexpected finds...my daughter visits the library daily – she struggles with reading and finds great pleasure in borrowing old favourites that she is able to have success in reading."

"We select quality literature to be sold at our Book Fairs – everyone is involved...parents, our teacher-librarian, our library assistant, kids..." "Linda, the teacher-librarian, has provided our kids with skills that they will take with them...they will be confident users of the public library, able to find what they want..." "Parents are very busy these days and so are their kids – lessons, sports and on and on...many do not have time to visit the public library regularly." "We are so proud of our library."

### **"Talk to me about your library..."**

Three students, from Grade 5 and Grade 6 – Daniel, Isaac and Sierra- at first quietly, then very enthusiastically tell me and show me what they think of their library "We love it...we can come when we need to...it's so easy to find what we want because it is really well organized and Ms. Steen has taught us how to search on the OPAC...can we show you how to use the OPAC?...Would you like us to show you around the fiction and nonfiction?...We love the picture books – the art in them is so cool...I use them to help me with my questions..."

Then I drop the bomb...

"Here's an idea...how would you like it if I could persuade Mr. M. and Ms. S. to allow you guys to be able to take all the books that are for your grade into your classrooms so that you can have them with you all of the time instead of having to traipse down the hall to the library. Pretty cool idea, hey?"...

Dead silence and worried looks came over their faces...One of them slowly spoke

"Would we still be able to come to the library?"

"No, it would not be a library any longer – probably be a staff room – the teachers need more space to work."

The kids responded with worry in their voices, "Well, that might seem like a good idea to some...but first of all how would you decide what should go into the Grade 6 classrooms? ...We wouldn't be able to get to the picture books because they would probably have to go into the Kindergarten and Grade ½ classrooms..." They picked up speed and volume at this point..."The teachers in the other classes wouldn't want us to disturb them so we wouldn't be able to get the books in their classrooms"... "How would we find anything?"...

And in very firm voices...“That’s a rotten idea...” “We love our library and we want it to stay this way.”

With those words ringing in my ears I bid farewell to everyone, left Hawkwood Elementary School Library (and rode into the sunset)...

Relieved, I again strongly believe that this notion of a vibrant, dynamic school library is not a fuddy-duddy idea, an out-dated concept, something that risk-takers scoff at – instead I had just seen an example of education at its best...cutting edge... exactly what good learning and teaching is all about... strong pedagogical philosophy put into practice. When done thoughtfully it is as good as it can get in a school... and...it is not just a fairy tale – it is alive and well in Calgary .

I would like to use the same words that ended the article regarding classroom libraries:

But every school needs a vision of what school and classroom

libraries need to become. Without such visions, there will be no

plan of action. Without some plan of action, nothing will change.

If we are to create thoughtful schools where all children become literate,

we need school and classroom libraries that provide all children access

to the books they need to accomplish that end.

(Allington & Cunningham, 1996)

*Note from the Author:*

*Our pedagogical practice needs to be supported by sound research. You may be interested in reading this news release which talks about the fact that both American and Canadian studies have shown that there is a significant connection between high student achievement and schools with libraries that support student learning...*

<http://www.cbe.ab.ca/sss/plc/nr01.asp> (Haycock et. al., 2004).

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