Professional learning in the digital age: Empowering the 21st century teacher-librarian

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Abstract

Teacher-librarians are interested in learning new things to be better able to meet the needs of the students and teachers in schools and school libraries. This paper reports the findings from a survey of Canadian teacher-librarians about their recent professional development experiences. While many teacher-librarians reported relevant professional development experiences at the school and district level (e.g. assessment, inquiry, information and communication technology, literacy, etc.), almost 20% of the respondents to this survey felt that they had received no professional development that helped them in their work in school libraries.

Introduction

Professional development of teachers is a much researched topic. Research has indicated that effective professional development is important to teacher learning but that teachers also learn from the work they do every day in schools (Kwakman, 2003). This paper is the first part of a larger study that explores how Canadian teacher-librarians are participating in life-long learning in the 21st century. Teacher-librarians in Canada often work in isolation in schools and school districts. District teacher-librarian associations may be small or non-existent. Provincial associations may only meet once a year for conferences and not all teacher-librarians will be able to attend. This research study examined the professional learning experiences of teacher-librarians.

An online survey of teacher-librarians from across Canada sought to find out:

- How are teacher-librarians getting their professional learning as part of their daily work life, school and district professional development opportunities?
- Are teacher-librarians sampling from a variety of professional development topics such as inquiry, multiple literacies, leadership and technology?
- How are associations supporting the work of teacher-librarians?

Review of the Literature

Professional development is a key component of every school year for teachers in schools. There are in-school professional development days, local conferences, shorter workshops and longer courses. Much has been written about one-size-fits-all PD approaches (Lieberman & Pointer-

Mace, 2008) and in some schools there is still an emphasis on these one-day workshop sessions where an "expert" comes in to share new ideas with teachers. Current research suggests there are many professional development alternatives to consider such as online communities (for example, Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit & McCloskey, 2009; Duncan-Howell, 2010), professional learning communities (for example, Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010), informal learning (for example, Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011). Mardis and Hoffman (2007) used online focus groups as a way to learn from and with a group of teacher-librarians. Professional associations also are an important part of teacher professional development. According to Rusaw (1995), "professional associations play three primary learning roles: (1) as providers of formal and informal learning opportunities, (2) as constructors of frames of reference in which professional and bureaucratic norms can be blended, and (3) as catalysts for changing conditions and relationships in external environments" (p. 223).

There are many national standard documents that guide the competencies for teacher-librarians (American Association of School Librarians, 2009; Asselin, Branch, & Oberg, 2003; International Society for Technology in Education, 2008) that can be used as a starting point to self-assess professional development needs. Shannon (2008) writes about preparation programs for teacher-librarians and these findings can help determine areas where recent graduates feel they need more professional development. Pon (2005) also provides a self-assessment rubric to help teacher-librarians determine areas of need for personal professional development.

According to Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit & McCloskey (2009), "although we need to build teachers' capacity for improvement, we also need to be sure that time, effort, and scare resources are expended only on quality programs that teach with and about best practices" (p. 8). To do this we need a better understanding of the current professional development experiences of teacher-librarians.

Methodology

An online survey was widely distributed in Canada through the researchers' personal contacts and by soliciting support from local, provincial, and national associations. We sought input from practicing teacher-librarians from coast to coast to coast. The survey asked participants to provide information about their formal teacher-librarian educational experiences, years of teacher-librarian service, participation in professional learning experiences locally, provincially, nationally and internationally.

The authors are also interested in the professional learning experiences that teacher-librarians have participated in during the past two school years. This included school-based professional development, district professional development, and learning opportunities offered by local, provincial, national and international associations and organizations.

The survey was distributed in late March 2011 to allow teacher-librarians to provide almost two full school years of information about their professional learning experiences. The survey results were analyzed in May 2011, by looking for common themes and trends that emerged across questions and throughout the comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998). The data are presented using representative quotes from the survey responses to support the patterns and themes. This paper will focus on responses from only four of the survey questions.

Results/Findings

Using provincial and national association contacts as a starting point, the researchers asked colleagues to forward the online survey to teacher-librarians. A total of 178 teacher-librarians from across the country responded to the online survey. Responses came from British Columbia (36), Alberta (16), Saskatchewan (15), Manitoba (8), Ontario (99), Quebec (1), New Brunswick (2) and Yukon (1). We don't have accurate numbers of practicing teacher-librarian in the country but we do know that there are many more teacher-librarians in Ontario than in any other province. Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland have very few. We do not know of any teacher-librarians in the Northwest Territories or Nunavut. See the graphs and table below for more demographic information about the respondents.
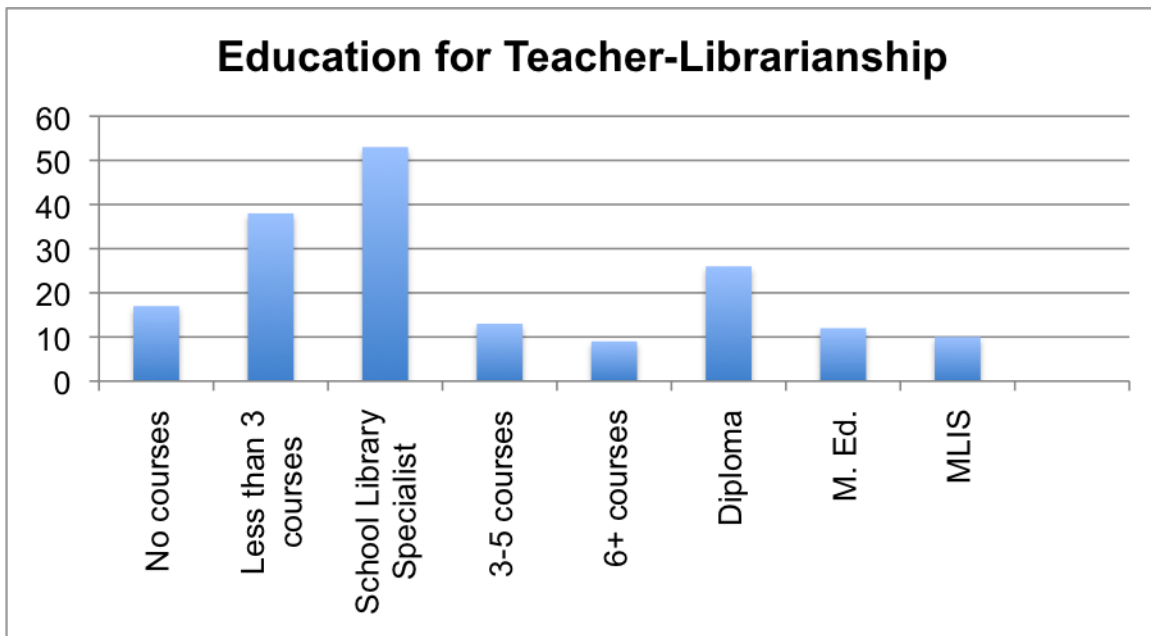
Figure 1. This graph shows the number of years of teaching experiences of the respondents.
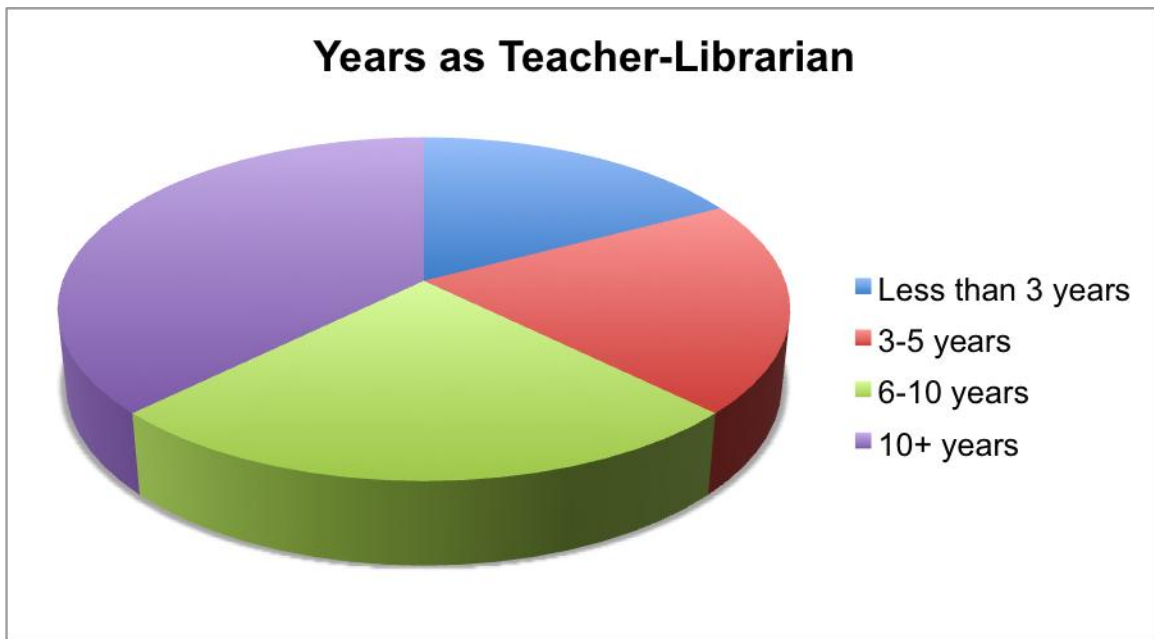
Figure 2. This graph shows the number of years of teacher-librarian experiences of the respondents.
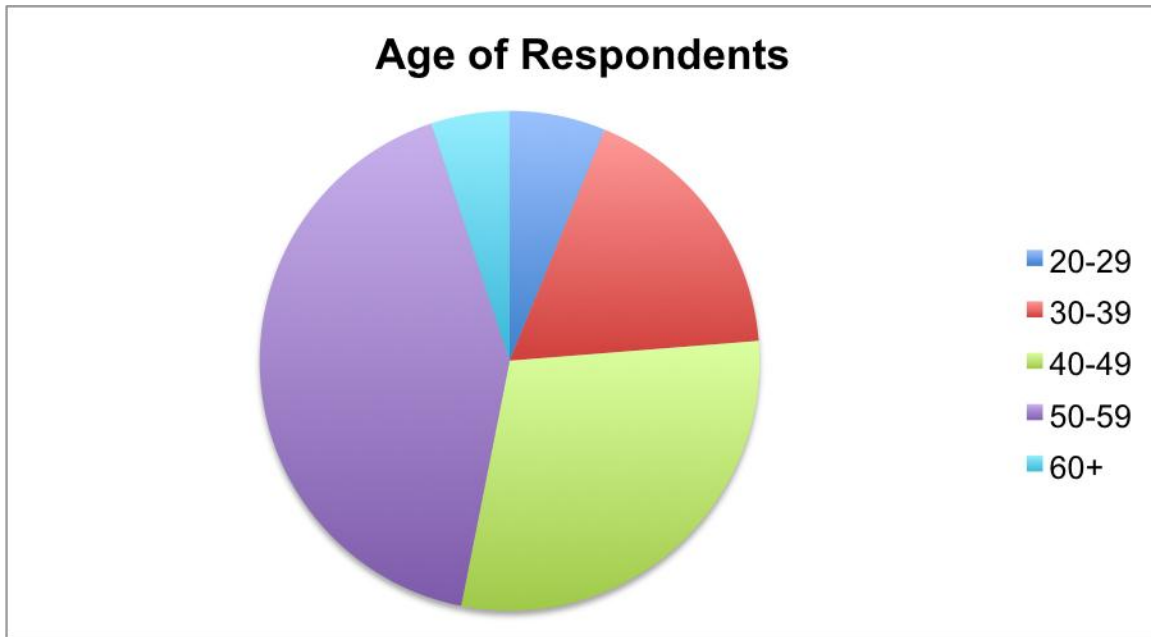
Age of Respondents

Figure 3. This graph shows the age of the respondents at the time of the survey.

Education for Teacher-Librarianship

Figure 4. This chart shows the level of education for teacher-librarianship of the respondents.

School-based Professional Development

The survey asked teacher-librarians to think about school-based professional development experiences during the past two years. Specifically, the researchers were interested in the experiences that were relevant to work in school libraries. The findings were very interesting. More than 30 teacher-librarians reported that none of the school-based professional development was relevant to their work in school libraries. One teacher-librarians stated, "As TL, I am rarely included in PD at the school level, other than during regular staff meetings." Another commented

that, "School-based activities are hard to participate in when one is based in 3 schools. One is never at the right place." Another wrote, "the only school-based professional development that I have done has been when I have put together a personal plan... in other words my PD was done in isolation."

On the other hand, teacher-librarians also felt that every professional development experience in the school was useful. A teacher-librarian commented, "Monthly PD on everything from differentiated learning, assessment, tech tools, inviting communities, equity issues, etc. All of these are vital to school libraries. Any classroom concern is a library concern." Another TL stated, "School-based PD has provided me with opportunities to create relationships with colleagues, rather than learning about things that I can actually do in my library program." One teacher-librarian noted, "I participate in many school based PD activities, from workshops to staff meetings to head's meetings to department subject based meetings to workshops on integrating technology in teaching. They all contribute to my work as a TL in a central leadership role in the school."

Respondents who indicated they had participated in relevant PD sessions listed a great many topics. The most frequent responses were technology-related professional development experiences. These included Web 2.0 tools (including Voicethread, Google Apps, Wikis, Blogs, Cartoon Creator and Prezi) which was mentioned 21 times, ICT (used when respondents mentioned technology professional development) mentioned 21 times, and SMARTBoards and Document cameras, mentioned 17 times. One participant commented, "The only activities really relevant to what I do are the IT professional development activities. I am so glad that I kept up with technology." Two teacher-librarians mentioned professional development about video conferencing, three mentioned learning more about online databases and one talked about a professional development day to learn more about 21st century teaching and learning. Eight teacher-librarians also mentioned having professional development about a new library automation system.

Eighteen respondents mentioned professional development experiences related to literacy initiatives, two more talked specifically about writing and another five mentioned *Reading Power* by Adrienne Gear as being relevant to their work in school libraries. One respondent indicated, "I am part of our Literacy Committee, and the PD we have developed and participated in has focused on reaching adolescent boys who are reluctant readers, and ESL students, both areas very relevant to my role in the library." One respondent indicated, "I find that things involving literacy, reading and/or technology are most relevant to me as I partner with other teachers." Three respondents indicated that they had participated in professional development about information literacy.

Respondents mentioned assessment professional development activities 17 times. Other types of relevant professional development that would interest all teachers included Differentiated Instruction (4 times), Special Education/Inclusive Education (4 times), Behaviour Management (1 time), Backwards Design and Universal Design for Learning (3 times), ESL (2 times), Numeracy (3 times), and Curriculum (6 times), Collaboration (2 times), Inquiry-based learning (8 times). Respondents also mentioned social issue types of professional development including community building, digital citizenship, equity, and restorative justice.

One teacher-librarian stated, "Since I'm also the literacy lead teacher in my school, I have taken a number of PD activities that although they were not directly related to the library, there was much overlap between my work as a teacher-librarian and as a literacy lead teacher. Some of those workshops had to do with the following: assessment, especially formative assessment i.e. assessment for learning; numeracy; technology related in-services... Most school-based pro-d does not directly relate to my work in the library - they tend to be more for classroom teachers."

Several of the respondents indicated that they provided in-school professional development sessions on a variety of topics. One respondent stated, "Nothing at the school level was relevant to my work as a teacher-librarian. I presented courses to teaching colleagues, on the use of technology and search skills (e.g. searching databases such as EBSCOHost, etc.), but received no professional development that enhanced my skills." Another teacher-librarian wrote, "I have been the presenter in a number of school-based PD activities regarding use of technology in the schools and inquiry-based instruction." Another teacher-librarian commented, "I have not attended any school-based professional development activities related to library work, but I have presented at least a dozen school-based workshops on research and using online databases."

District Level Professional Development

The survey asked teacher-librarians to think about their district level professional development experiences during the past two years. Specifically, the researchers were interested in the experiences that were relevant to work in school libraries. One respondent stated that "my school board plans one Professional Development day a year for librarians. They are usually a good reminder of what we do, provide a few new ideas, and a chance to meet other librarians." Twenty-one respondents similarly noted that the opportunity to network and meet with other teacher-librarians from their district was particularly relevant to their work in school libraries. Another respondent elaborated on this, stating that "most PD focuses on trying to get us involved in whatever board initiates are 'hot' that year. Unfortunately this rarely coincides with what the teachers we are serving would like us to be doing for them. I appreciate the opportunity to network with other teacher-librarians. It is the time spent talking and exchanging ideas and problem-solving amongst ourselves that I have found more valuable than the specified PD (some of which has not even stuck in my head)."

Other district-level professional development activities that were relevant to respondents in this study included workshops on literacy, which was mentioned 20 times. Specifically, *Reading Power* by Adrienne Gear was mentioned twice, sessions about books, reading, authors, or readers advisory were mentioned 11 times, and Aboriginal literature was included 3 times in the responses to this question. One respondent wrote "I went to a great workshop by Marlene Turkington where she not only told us about up and coming books, but how to use publishers' websites to find out more information about the author, book trailers, and online author visits. This has been HUGE. I have used book trailers and showing first chapters on my Smartboard as a way to get kids hooked on great books." Another person stated that "I attended an excellent half day workshop on Canadian Aboriginal literature resources. As Aboriginal Education initiatives are significant in the district in which I worked, this was extremely helpful, both for my own work in making library acquisitions, and in assisting teachers in planning activities involving Aboriginal themes and issues."

Respondents also highlighted general library training and workshops related to professional practice as relevant to their work in school libraries. These types of professional development opportunities were mentioned 19 times, while workshops specifically on policies and procedures

were mentioned 3 times and sessions about the library as learning commons were mentioned 8 times. A number of respondents to this study have also participated in professional learning communities (PLCs) with other teacher-librarians in their district to discuss common issues, questions, and best practices. Professional learning communities was mentioned 7 times. One person wrote that "so far there's been 2 teacher-librarian PLCs [in our district]. First was a focus on the development of a learning commons in our schools and second was on teaching learning critical pathways." Another respondent stated that "I belong to a library professional learning community. We have four half days a year to meet. We have worked on different initiatives, and I find this helpful."

Respondents also highlighted district or provincial conferences as valuable learning opportunities. Regularly scheduled conferences was mentioned 17 times as an important way to maintain and build connections and learn new library-related skills. As one respondent stated, "every year our teacher-librarian facilitator organizes a district-wide teacher-librarian conference. All of the sessions are relevant to our work in libraries. There are sessions offered on new software and programs, new databases, our new curriculum document, our library software, and publishers attend to provide booktalks on their newest titles. T-Ls in the board lead these sessions."

Along with professional practice, respondents to this study highlighted opportunities related to instruction, teaching, and learning as relevant professional development. For example, inquiry (10 times), differentiated instruction (4 times), and assessment (5 times) were all listed as relevant topics for PD. Respondents also noted that they had attended workshops related to new provincial curriculum (13 times).

Technology was also mentioned repeatedly by respondents to this survey. Professional Development opportunities related to technology in general were mentioned 37 times with respondents providing examples such as workshops on iPads, Moodle, digital citizenship, digital storytelling, and 21st century learning. More specifically, respondents highlighted online database training (mentioned 13 times), circulation system training (mentioned 23 times), websites or virtual library development (mentioned 6 times) as being particularly relevant to their work. Web 2.0 training was also highlighted as important and worthwhile professional development, with 20 respondents mentioning tools such as Voicethread, glogster, Ning, BitStrips, Shelfari, Wikis, and social networking as the topics for these workshops. As one person wrote "our division provides 2 half day PD sessions each year to all TLs. In the last 2 years we have been focussing on technology and Web 2.0. I have personally presented on Diigo, Podcasting, Animoto booktrailers and have participate din sessions on blogging and google docs." Finally, respondents also noted that opportunities to learn about specific hardware (such as document cameras and smartboards) was also relevant (mentioned 9 times). One respondent noted that "SMART training and Web 2.0 training [has been relevant]. SMART more than Web 2.0 has been useful to me with regards to inservicing teachers at the school, which has 13 classrooms with fixed SMARTboards. Web 2.0 training gave me some tools to use in my lessons, but I primarily learned some interesting tricks to pass along to teachers. A webinar on the EBSCO [database] was [also] very useful."

Some respondents noted that there were few or no district level professional development opportunities that related to their work in school libraries (noted 22 times). For example, one respondent noted that "we don't get [district level PD]. We always have to create our own opportunities." Another person wrote that "there have been no opportunities except for a first day of school in-service provided by the teacher-librarian association." Other comments included:

"Our school division doesn't employ anyone with specific library training, so the PD is rather scattered!" and "We don't get these. We always have to create our own opportunities" and "Unfortunately, there has been very little board-wide PD for TLs in the past two years, since a new Director instituted a new policy for it that seems to have left TLs out in the cold."

It was also indicated that some respondents were often in a position to give professional development for other teacher-librarians or teachers but found little of relevance to them personally (11 times). One respondent explained that "without a library consultant in our district, a small group of TLs organize PD for our fellow librarians. These opportunities normally take place at our board office. We have had sessions with our district [subject] consultants." Similarly, "I provide 3 PD workshops for our elementary library clerks each year, as well as in-servicing staff on the virtual library products available to them."

While many respondents noted that there was little or no relevant PD for teacher-librarians in their district, one person did suggest that "professional learning opportunities that focused on thinking and inquiry as it relates to technology and literacy [has been valuable]. There has been nothing specific to teacher-librarianship, but the connections to my role have been apparent as I work with teachers. It is important to not only stay on top of what is in the field of teacher-librarianship, but to participate in professional learning alongside teachers to understand what they are learning and how to connect with them.

Professional Association Membership
Most of the respondents indicated that they belonged to at least one teacher-librarian association. Provincial/Territorial Association membership was the most popular with 140 respondents indicating they were members. One hundred nine respondents indicated they belonged to a local association while only 23 belonged to a national association. Twenty-two respondents belonged to the International Association of School Librarianship, while one belonged to the International Reading Association, one belonged to the International Society for Technology in Education, one belonged to the American Library Association and one belonged to an independent school librarians' association.
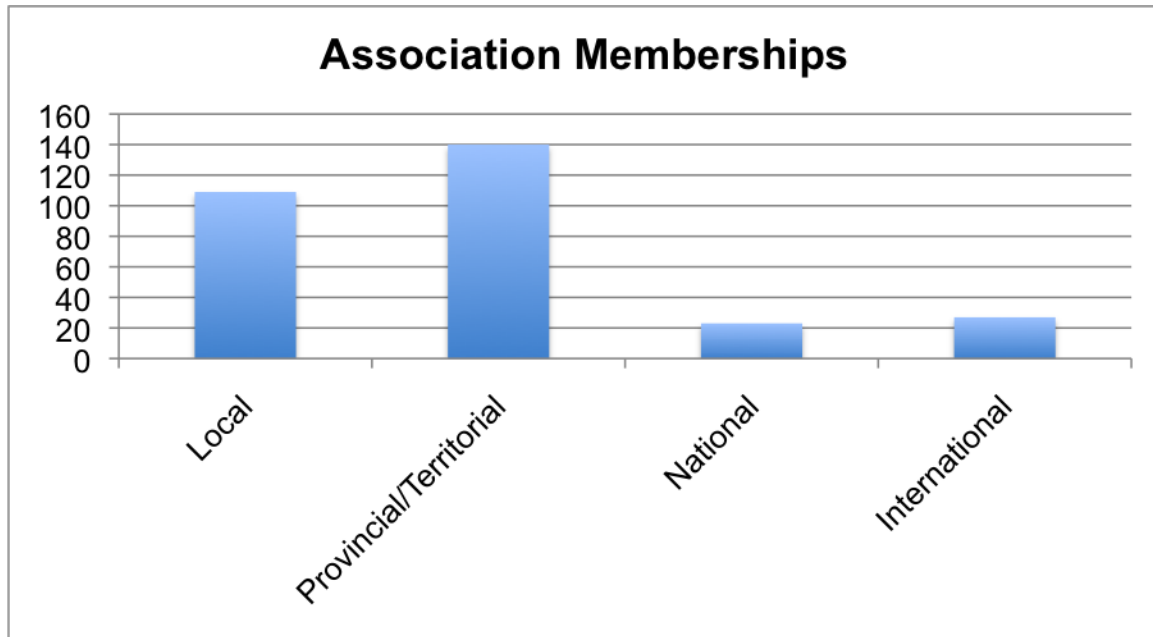
Figure 5. This chart shows the membership of respondents in teacher-librarianship associations.

It is clear that local and provincial/territorial associations are very popular with respondents.

Professional Association Sponsored Professional Development

The final survey question which will be discussed in this paper asked respondents to list any professional development activities that they had participated in over the last 2 years through their membership in an association. The results from this question were varied. Provincial teacher-librarian and/or library association conferences were mentioned most frequently (76 times), with respondents noting specifically that they had attended conferences such as SuperConference (Ontario Library Association) and the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians Association (BCTLA) annual conference. One respondent stated that "I love to attend the Ontario School Library Association's annual conference. I always find the workshops relevant and informative." Similarly, another respondent wrote that the "OLA conference has been a tremendous source of professional growth and networking." The Canadian Library Association (CLA) conference was also mentioned (8 times), particularly the 2010 conference with Treasure Mountain. Other conferences such as Friends of the School Library conference, District Technology Days, School Library as a Centre for Human Rights conference, and a conference on the school library and 21st century literacies were also mentioned (45 times).

Association sponsored annual general meetings (AGMs) and other special events were also highlighted as valuable opportunities for networking and learning (5 times).

Online conferences, webinars, and Elluminate sessions were mentioned 27 times throughout the responses. For example, one person "took part in an Elluminate session on how to set up on-line book clubs" while another person has participated in "well over 30 conferences/webinars/workshops" online. Finally, another respondent noted that the provincial school library association in Saskatchewan (SSLA) "has provided some excellent online learning

opportunities for teachers and teacher-librarians in our province. I have participated in four or five. They have all been practical and most helpful."

In addition to taking part in various professional development sessions through their associations, respondents also indicated that they were often asked to present at these workshops or conferences (11 times).

Finally, it is clear that not every respondent has been able to take advantage of professional development opportunities through their membership in professional associations. There were 10 responses of "none" to this question. One person noted that "during the last two years, I have been working part-time and was unable to get sufficient release time to attend workshops provided by any of the above associations", while another person wrote that "I have not participated in association PD over the last 2 years. [Special projects have] dictated how/where school/district PD funds are spent and it is on assessment and technology only."

Discussion
This study examined how teacher-librarians get their professional learning as part of their daily work life, school and district professional development opportunities? The researchers were also interested in the types of professional development experiences happening through association membership. This paper reports on responses from four of the questions from a survey that was sent to teacher-librarians across Canada.

Respondents indicated that teacher-librarians attended a variety of relevant professional development experiences in their school. Technology professional development, including Web 2.0 tools and SMARTBoard training, was most often cited as being relevant to work in school libraries. Literacy professional development, including sessions on writing and the work of Adrienne Gear and *Reading Power* were also relevant to teacher-librarians. Not surprisingly, Assessment, Curriculum, Special Education/Inclusion, Differentiated Instruction, and Inquiry-based learning were also relevant topics. Several respondents indicated that they had provided professional development to their teaching colleagues and also to parents in the school.

Dishearteningly, even with a list of more than 25 relevant professional development experiences that had occurred in schools across the country, 37 teacher-librarians reported that, in the past two years, none of the school-based professional development was relevant to their work in the school library. What do individual teacher-librarians find relevant in school-based professional development and why?

The researchers also asked respondents to consider the district level professional development opportunities available to them. Respondents indicated that literacy and technology-related professional development were the most relevant to their work in school libraries. Specifically, respondents were able to access professional development at a district level on technology topics such as Web 2.0 tools, circulation system training, and database training. Also relevant to teacher-librarians were literacy-related topics such as booktalks and readers' advisory, author visits, and *Reading Power* by Adrienne Gear.

Like the school-based professional development, several respondents to this survey mentioned that they were often responsible for providing district level PD to their colleagues, indicating that

many teacher-librarians are taking on a leadership role in their districts. Also similar to the school-based PD, many teacher-librarians reported that there was little or no relevant district-level PD opportunities for them. Twenty-two respondents indicated that district level PD for teacher-librarians was unavailable to them or not relevant to their current needs. Again, it is interesting to consider what individual teacher-librarians consider relevant to their work and how school districts can work to provide professional development for teacher-librarians that better meets their needs.

Most respondents to this survey indicated that they were members of at least one professional association for teacher-librarianship. Many are members of their local or provincial teacher-librarian association, while a small number are members of national or international teacher-librarian associations or other related professional associations (such as the International Reading Association). Clearly, these teacher-librarians see value in being a member of an association, particularly at the local or provincial level.

Tapping into professional development opportunities (such as conferences, workshops, webinars, etc.) through their professional associations is one such benefit of membership. Teacher-librarians overwhelmingly (129 times) commented on the importance of attending conferences sponsored by local, provincial, national, or other associations. Unfortunately, not everyone who participated in this survey was able to participate in conferences such as this, usually due to the cost of registration and/or travel or the cost involved in hiring substitute teachers. While conferences were seen as important professional development and networking opportunities, not every teacher-librarian is given the opportunity to participate in this kind of PD, even though they may also be members in a professional association.

Teacher-librarians who responded to this survey also indicated that they were increasingly taking advantage of more informal professional development offered by the associations to which they belong. These informal sessions included webinars, Elluminate sessions, online conferences, or meetings that are organized by associations to meet the broader needs of their membership. The benefit to online professional development such as this is that it is often free or low cost (particularly in comparison to attending a conference), teacher-librarians can attend remotely from their school or library, the topics are often specific, and the time commitment is usually small, which means a teacher-librarian could participate during a lunch break of after school, eliminating the need for a substitute teacher.

Based on the findings from this survey, it would appear that conferences are very much appreciated by teacher-librarians who are fortunate enough to be able to attend them; however, professional associations would also do well by their members to organize ongoing, virtual professional development opportunities that leverage the technology available to connect their members with one another and with experts from around the world. This kind of 'just in time' learning will only grow in popularity as teacher-librarians' budgets and time continue to be restricted.

Conclusions
Teacher-librarians are interested in learning new things to be better able to meet the needs of the students and teachers in schools and school libraries. As school leaders, they should be at the forefront of new initiatives that improve teaching and learning in their schools. This study sought

to understand the professional learning opportunities and experiences of teacher-librarians across Canada.

While many teacher-librarians reported relevant professional development experiences at the school and district level, almost 20% of the respondents to this survey felt that they had received no professional development that helped them in their work in school libraries. It is unclear from these findings whether these teacher-librarians did not see the relevance of some of the topics (e.g. assessment, inquiry, information and communication technology, literacy, etc.) or if there was, indeed, no relevant professional development experiences offered at the school or district level.

Do we need to broaden understandings of what professional development for teacher-librarians looks like? Or do we need to recognize that rarely, if ever, in a school full of classroom teachers, will there be professional development specifically for teacher-librarians? If we agree that professional development at the school or district levels will rarely meet the unique needs of teacher-librarians, how then do we encourage and promote other types of professional development (e.g., webinars, online forums, nings, professional learning communities, etc.)? How do we help teacher-librarians access it?

While conferences are a very important professional development opportunity for teacher-librarians, associations also have a huge role to play a role in supporting the day-to-day professional learning needs of teacher-librarians. Local and provincial associations are in a position to understand the specific situational and contextual needs of their members. Therefore, these associations should support and manage ongoing professional development opportunities for teacher-librarians. It is clear from this research that many teacher-librarians are already providing professional development opportunities at the school and district level. Associations could leverage this expertise to share with more members of an association using technologies such as Elluminate and video conferencing as well as listservs, nings, and wikis.

This research will be important to programs educating teacher-librarians, local, provincial, and national and international associations, district and provincial professional development providers and to teacher-librarians who are looking to find ways to enhance their professional learning opportunities.

Three Key Learnings
- 30/178 teacher-librarians reported that none of the school-based professional development was relevant to their work in school libraries while the rest listed many different professional development topics including technology, literacy and teaching and learning issues.
- District level professional level rarely meets the needs of teacher-librarians and so they need to seek out other forms of professional development.
- Local and provincial associations play a key role in providing networking opportunities for teacher-librarians and could take on a larger role in professional development.

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Statement of Originality
This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.