

Abstract

This modified case study examines how the members of the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' Association (BCTLA), a Provincial Specialist Association (PSA) of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), work together to advocate for strong school library programs headed by a credentialed school librarian. Since 2002, despite nullification of a collective bargaining agreement that mandated a ratio of school librarians to students, the province has maintained 70 percent of its school librarian positions. The researcher found that the BCTF provides the structure and megaphone for advocacy, while the members of BCTLA are responsible for the "boots on t

Nevertheless, teachers involved in unions tend to be clustered in specific departments or among

Figure 1. School librarian FTE per province (Coish 2005).

Between 2001 and 2012, there was a 30 percent decline in school librarian positions in British Columbia. However, between the 2011

Figure 2. School librarian positions in British Columbia, 2001–2013 (BCTF 2013).

Since 2002, despite the nullification of a collective bargaining agreement that mandated a specific ratio of school librarians in British Columbia's public schools, the province has maintained approximately 70 percent of its school librarian positions (BCTF 2013).

History of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation and the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' Association

In Canadian provinces school library organizations are typically part of provincial teachers' unions, with the exception of Ontario, which has a standalone school library association as part of its larger library association. This arrangement has implications for advocacy. A union pursues collective bargaining agreements and can strike, lobby, and endorse political candidates for office. Therefore, the British Columbia situation brings up some interesting questions vis-à-vis the amount and types of advocacy in which school librarians can and do participate.

History of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation

The BCTF was formed in 1917 and incorporated in 1919. The BCTF was born out of a concern that teachers were underpaid, and working conditions were poor (BCTF 2002). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the cost of living in British Columbia rose at a rate five times faster than the increase in teacher compensation. Tenure was another early concern of teacher members. Prior to the establishment of the union, teachers could be dismissed without cause at the end of any school term. The BCTF successfully negotiated for tenure requirements across the province (BCTF 2002). Another early concern was the awarding of pensions to teachers based on many years of service. Prior to the incorporation of the union, pensions could be awarded only by a special act of the British Columbia Legislature. Due to the BCTF's lobbying, the union was able to secure mandatory pensions for its members (BCTF 2002).

In the 1940s and 1950s the BCTF turned its attention to matters of developing teaching as a profession. This goal was achieved by advocating for teacher involvement in the curriculum

- Social media options, including seven blogs, three wikis, two Twitter accounts, a Ning, and a Facebook group.
- Professional publications such as *The Bookmark* journal, school library position statements, and BCTLA book reviews.
- Guides and tools for all BC educators, including *The Points of Inquiry: A Framework for Information Literacy and the 21st Century Learner* and *The 21st-Century Learner and Ethics of Information Use: A Guide for Teachers*.
- Fourteen awards and grants, including one to support school librarian professional inquiry.
- Resources and statistics to support school library and school librarian advocacy efforts, including the results from BCTLA's nearly thirty years of annual BC school library *Working and Learning Conditions Surveys* (Daly 2012).

As demonstrated above, the BCTLA engages in many advocacy activities and has a strong presence in the BCTF. The president of BCTLA stated, "Given the global economic situation and related financial challenges, school librarians could have been completely eliminated. Without the union and its predominance in education matters, that 70 percent-30 percent statistic would probably be reversed" (H. Daly, personal communication, January 30, 2012).

Method

A modified descriptive case study approach was used. The word "modified" signals that data were collected over an abbreviated period of time (Frioni 2013). Robert E. Stake (1995) explained that researchers can be restricted in the data they collect by access to the data site. In this modified descriptive case study, due to limited funding and time allotted at the data site, my access to the site was restricted to two meetings of the BCTLA and three interviews of BCTF officials. This restriction of time and access is a limitation of the study, and future studies should provide for a more in-depth data collection.

Robert K. Yin (2009) outlined four purposes of a descriptive case study. First, the method can explain real-life decisions including complex causal links. Second, a case study can describe the real-life context of the situation and any decisions made. Third, the case study can describe the decision being made. Finally, descriptive case studies can explore those contexts in which the event being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes. The modified descriptive case study method

Finding 4: A Strong Personal Connection Exists among BCTLA Members.

Members that partook in the discussions indicated that participating in the BCTLA is valuable for expanding professional networking and for identifying problems and solving them together. BCTLA members have strong personal connections with each other. In other words, BCTLA is an interconnected group. Members are organized and passionate about school librarianship. An executive board officer remarked, "I'm back into this now once again and [there are] so many meetings, but really feeling happy to be part of a thriving culture." Another executive board officer stated, "One of the good things about this meeting is that we can identify the problem without being really negative about it and work towards solutions." Additionally, a table officer commented on the value of "just knowing there are a lot of other people out there doing the same job, have been in the same shoes and here's some stuff to help you."

Evident in the data was the perception by BCTLA table officers and executive board members that the association was "their" association, and their involvement in the association contributes to its strength. Table officers and executive board members mentioned that they felt as if they were part of a whole and that their collective voices made the association strong. Bascia (1990) has explained that teachers' unions can provide teachers with a major source of their professional identity, and this appears to be the case for the BCTLA members who participated in the discussions. A third executive board officer stated, "I just like being involved. I get inspired by it, and I like to hear what's going on." Additionally, one senior BCTF official al boarommented o]TJ -115.4 -1.

BCTLA school librarians employ these strategies in various ways. They educate stakeholders about their roles and the effect of their position in the school, for example, by presenting at board meetings and conducting programs such as Drop Everything and Read. They also use social networking and assist other teachers, especially new teachers. One executive board member commented that “[School librarians] help to...remind people and I think they’re important to do. Drop Everything and Read, I think, is a really good thing because it actually calls for an action. Saying nice things about school libraries and actually doing something. You’re asked to do something that relates to libraries; I think is really an important way of promoting. And, there seems to be a fair amount of take-up on it as well.”

The table officers and executive board members remarked about how difficult it is to be a school librarian, that advocacy was always on the forefront because they continually feel as if they are under siege by both the British Columbia Ministry of Education as well as issues at the local level. The BCTF policy analyst stated, “In the last few years [there has been] a...kind of an attack almost on teacher-librarians and...a kind of downgrading of provincial Ministry expectations about support to that.” Despite these challenges, the passion of the participants shone through. It was clear in the meetings that the BCTLA members interviewed believe that a school library staffed by a credentialed school librarian is a cornerstone of every school. Several

librarians, then I think it would happen. Governments really, really listen to public opinion. And, you know, I've seen public opinion shift in huge ways over things like drunk driving.”

As evidenced by the continuing litigation, the recent strike, and negotiations between the BCTF and the Ministry of Education, the battle to have a credentialed school librarian in every school in British Columbia continues to be daunting. It is unknown at this time whether the province-wide student to school librarian staffing ratio will be reinstated. It is clear, however, through the messaging of the BCTF that the union's position is to advocate for a return to the original staffing ratio that was agreed upon in 1994. Political pressures brought to bear by the Ministry of Education may make reinstatement of the ratio difficult. The fact that the union voted overwhelmingly for and participated in a strike is evidence that members of the BCTF believe that somewhat drastic measures must be taken in order for the Ministry of Education to sit at the table and engage in collective bargaining.

Implications and Recommendations

The structure of a union opens many possibilities for school library advocacy. Advocacy and agenda setting happens primarily in localized contexts, and school librarians must adapt advocacy strategies to fit their unique situations (IFLA 2014). For example, in the Boston area, union leaders brought a grievance against Raynham and Bridgewater public schools when it was discovered that volunteers had been staffing school libraries rather than certified school librarians (Legere 2010). However, the grievance was quickly withdrawn as public backlash criticized the union for keeping students from accessing the libraries (Hyman 2011). This example indicates the tenuous nature of union activities in school library advocacy.

In another example, an advocacy group called Chicago School Librarians has been working with the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) in advocating for a full-time librarian in every Chicago public school. They have garnered national press (Vevea 2014) and used the structure of the union to pressure Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett to add school librarians (CTU Communications 2014). The group uses a strategy of connecting with the union's larger goals related to an equal education for all students. As of this writing, the matter has not been decided, and the Chicago School Librarians group continues to advocate for librarians in every public school. It may be preferable to connect to the union's priorities and demonstrate how strong school libraries contribute to those priorities, rather than having the union take an adversarial stance against the school district. To avoid pitfalls, advocates should work with their union leadership to decide the best course of actions.

Based on the findings of this research, it appears that school librarians can effectively use a union structure to carry out advocacy activities.

that represent their collective voice” (Winzer and Mazurek 2011, 1–2). Involvement in a teachers’ union or professional association can maximize school library advocates’ voices.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the American Association of School Librarians and Capstone for the grant awarded to carry out this research.

The author would like to acknowledge Ja Youn Kwon for her role in the research, Pat Dutton for providing transcription services, and Mette Henriksen Aas, Elizabeth Burns, Diane Oberg, and her writing group for assistance in reviewing the manuscript.

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Appendix A

BCTF Staff Interview Questions

BCTLA Executive Board and Council Questions

1. How long have you been a staff member/table officer/executive board member? Why did you choose to participate in this association?
2. How does your past experience (work, volunteer, family) impact your activities as a staff member/table officer/executive board member?
3. Discuss the relationship between Provincial Specialist Associations and the BCTF. Specifically, what is the relationship between BCTF and BCTLA?
4. How do the BCTLA and the BCTF work together to advocate for a credentialed teacher-librarian in every provincial school?
5. What is the impact of this advocacy effort?
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