

Specialist Teachers and Teacher-Librarians

THE ISSUE

Staffing elementary schools with teacher-librarians and teachers who have specialized training in physical education, guidance, and the arts greatly enriches the educational experience of students and leads to a broader range of extra-curricular activities at the school level. The deployment of specialist teachers provides the timetabling flexibility for regular classroom teachers to have the preparation time they need. Specialist teachers and teacher-librarians contribute not only to student achievement but also to broader student development and success.

The number of specialist teachers at the elementary level has dropped significantly since 1999 when the current funding model was introduced. A decade ago, ETFO negotiated additional funding for specialist teachers that contributed to a modest increase in their numbers. In 2005-06, the government invested an additional \$39 million to support approximately 600 additional specialist teachers. By 2008-09, the investment grew to \$146 million that supported an estimated 2,000 additional specialist teachers allocated across both public and Catholic elementary schools.ⁱ The per pupil allocation of teacher-librarians has not changed since 1999.

The Ontario education grants still leave elementary students significantly short-changed in terms of their access to quality programs in the arts and health and physical education and support from teacher-librarians. The shortfall is magnified in smaller and more remote schools that have less access to specialist teachers and programs because the funding is based on per pupil grants rather than grants per school.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Politicians and policy-makers often seek a “silver bullet” in terms of how to improve student achievement, often measured through standardized tests. Education research points to various factors that enhance the ability of teachers to support student academic achievement as well as students’ overall cognitive, emotional and social development; it also reinforces the view that there is no single intervention or policy that plays the central role. The bottom line is that there are a number of factors at play and one of them is the role played by specialist teachers and teacher-librarians. An extensive literature review commissioned by ETFOⁱⁱ confirms that “overall, the literature surrounding specialist teachers in a range of content areas appears to

support the claim that specialist teachers can positively impact student achievement and contribute to student success at the elementary level.” This research review included the role of teacher-librarians.

Teacher-Librarians

Teacher-librarians, who have specialist training and credentials, play a critical role in developing student literacy, supporting teachers’ classroom programs, and making the library the technological hub of the school. The teacher-librarian is most effective when working in partnership with the classroom teacher. Too often, teacher-librarians are used to provide preparation time, which doesn’t support the partnership model.

The ETFO literature review reports that “teacher-librarians appear to positively impact student achievement and success.” Ontario research shows that grade 3 and 6 students in schools with teacher-librarians are more likely to report that they enjoy reading. It demonstrates a correlation between elementary student literacy achievement and support from trained library staff.

The status of teacher-librarians is monitored through the annual reports of the Ontario non-profit organization People for Education. Its 2015 annual reportⁱⁱⁱ states that 60 per cent of elementary schools have a full- or part-time teacher-librarian, 40 per cent have no teacher-librarian, and 8 per cent don’t have either a teacher-librarian or library technician.

Music, Drama and Visual Arts

Arts education gives students a greater motivation to learn, improved self-esteem, communication and social skills, increased creativity and innovation, and a lifelong appreciation for the arts. The ETFO-commissioned literature review reports that “specialist teachers in the arts are shown to contribute to the development of students.” It states that “arts education by specialist teachers may benefit students with respect to achievement as well as other measures of development and success such as creativity and critical thinking.”

The People for Education 2015 survey reports that 45 per cent of elementary schools have a music teacher, either full- or part-time; only 25 per cent of elementary schools have a full-time music teacher. In schools with grades 7 and 8, only 15 per cent have a specialist visual arts teacher and only 10 per cent have a specialist drama teacher. The People for Education 2014 survey^{iv} reported that only 43 per cent of Ontario elementary schools had a specialist music teacher, the lowest proportion of any province in Canada.

Health and Physical Education

The general health of children and youth is becoming a national concern as the incidence of obesity and childhood diabetes increases. The literature review indicates that physical education specialists’ strong instruction and instructional strategies contribute to student performance. It also finds that the research “appears to indicate that specialist teachers in

health and physical education can positively impact student achievement and other measures of positive student development such as the enhancement of healthy and active lifestyles.”

The People for Education 2015 survey reports that 42 per cent of elementary schools have a health and physical education teacher, showing a decline in the last three years. There are considerable regional differences: only 21 per cent of elementary schools in northern Ontario, for example, have a health and physical education teacher, compared to 74 per cent in the Greater Toronto Area.

Guidance

The literature review reports that while research concerning guidance specialists and student achievement is limited, “some evidence does point to positive effects of counsellors in reducing student discipline issues and possibly increasing test scores.” Overall, the review found that guidance specialists contribute to learning and improved outcomes as well as the socio-emotional health and safety of students.

The People for Education 2015 survey reports that only 14 per cent of Ontario elementary schools have at least one guidance counsellor, and among that small group, only 10 per cent have counsellors that are full-time. Only 20 per cent of schools with grades 7 and 8 have guidance counsellors, and the vast majority of these counsellors are part-time. This compares to 99 per cent of Ontario high schools that have at least one guidance counsellor.

As with other specialist teachers, there is great regional disparity: 32 percent of Greater Toronto Area elementary schools have at least one full- or part-time guidance counsellor, compared to 5 per cent of eastern Ontario schools, 5 per cent of central Ontario schools, 4 per cent in the southwest and 7 per cent in northern Ontario.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the skills and effectiveness of the regular classroom teacher, there is no single factor that determines student academic success and development. There are multiple factors at play, including class size, class composition, professional learning, curriculum resources, and support from other educational professionals. Research confirms that the knowledge and expertise of teacher-librarians and specialist teachers make an important contribution to the quality of elementary education, both in terms of academic success and in terms of students’ broader emotional, physical, cognitive, personal and social development. Ontario’s education funding model should be reformed to ensure all elementary students benefit from the enriched learning experience provided by teacher-librarians and specialist teachers.

ⁱ Ontario Ministry of Education. *Education Funding Technical Papers*, 2005-06 – 2008-09.

ⁱⁱ Pollock Katina and Michael Mindzak (2015). *Specialist Teachers - A Review of the Literature prepared for the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario*. Toronto.

ⁱⁱⁱ People for Education (2015). *Mind the Gap: Inequality in Ontario Schools*. Toronto

^{iv} People for Education (2014). *Public Education: Our Best Investment*. Toronto.