

It's Time to Pull the Weeds

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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Maintaining a school library collection involves a plethora of organizational issues. School libraries are bound to have some problems with organization given that several thousand items are housed in one room, several hundred patrons select materials from the shelves each week, and curricula demand ever-changing, updated resources. One of the requirements of maintaining an existing collection is weeding.

What is Weeding?

When we refer to weeding within the context of a garden, we can all relate to removing unwanted plants growing amongst the flourishing vegetables and blossoming flowers on our hands and knees. Honestly, most people dislike this task. At first, the thought of weeding is overwhelming and exhausting. However, the satisfaction of knowing you have removed the noxious growth overwhelms the initial dread. You feel relieved to know that the time spent planting, watering, nurturing and weeding will have great reward in the end. The same thoughts and feelings come to mind when weeding a library collection.

Weeding in a library setting is the process of removing worn out, low circulated, unwanted or outdated materials from a library. Doll and Barron (2002), state that “weeding is sometimes thought of as selection in reverse because it removes resources from the collection when they are no longer useful” (p.59). This is not limited to just books, but also other materials such as magazines, globes, maps, DVDs, videos, or even electronic resources. Essentially weeding is the act of removing the “weeds” from the thriving resources. Weeding is essential to running a useful library and it needs to be considered regularly.

“Changing formats, more appealing books for kids, increasing digital content, our changing world, needs of 21st century media programs, and, most importantly, the needs of our students make it imperative that we weed our collections - print, nonprint, and electronic” (Anderson, 2010, p. 28). It seems like common sense to get rid of items that are no longer useful or needed. Why would any teacher-librarian want resources in the collection that are useless to patrons? Teacher-librarians want to highlight the most useful items without having others in the way.

School libraries have a responsibility to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information possible. Weeding not only allows for this, but also presents the school library as a more credible source for information and enables patrons to find what they need more easily (Mathews, 2010, p.54). When ordering new items to be placed in a school library, old items must be weeded out to make room for the new and relevant materials.

Who Is In Charge Of The Process?

The process of weeding is a huge undertaking for just one person. It would be an overwhelming task for a teacher-librarian alone. Although the teacher-librarian is responsible for weeding the collection, the expertise of faculty from various fields or grade levels should be enlisted. Classroom teachers can provide information relating to the curriculum that can assist a media specialist in making professional judgments about which materials can be discarded without affecting curriculum needs. (Bishop, 2007, p.121)

Should volunteers be recruited? As long as they have some background knowledge and training in de-selection rationale and guidelines, supportive and qualified volunteers may assist with weeding. Volunteers could consist of other teachers, teacher-librarians, support staff, community volunteers, or parents. They can be involved with the preparations, the actual weeding process or with packing the discards. Anderson (2010) suggests that volunteers can sort the pulled books, pack boxes, add labels, relocate the boxed materials, etc. (p. 29).

What Are Some Reasons To Weed?

There are several reasons why a teacher-librarian should weed out unwanted materials:

Accuracy - Often information changes: geographical data, terminology, advances in technology and medicine, political leaders, and pop culture are a few examples. Check copyright dates. School library collections need to reflect the current world accurately.

Representation – Teacher- librarians need to be careful how materials represent people of the world. They should avoid stereotypes of age, gender, or nationality.

Condition - Items that are in poor condition should be weeded. Some items are beyond repair and are not suitable for circulation.

Duplicates – Perhaps a particular item was in high demand at one period of time, but is no longer required in multiples. Weed out duplicate copies.

Appeal - Physical space can be a cause for weeding. “Buildings are not easily expanded, and there are only so many clever compact-shelving ideas available” (Doll & Barron, 2002, p.63). Shelves may be over-crowded, making it difficult for patrons to not only locate an item but also to retrieve it.

Appropriate reading levels – It is important to know school library patrons. Weed out any materials that are not at an appropriate reading level for the readers.

Circulation - If an item is not often borrowed and has a poor circulation record; it should be considered for weeding. Make sure to determine why it did not circulate. Was it because it could not be found amongst the “weeds”, or poor quality books, or because it is not of interest to patrons?

Relevance to curriculum – Curricula change and are updated often. If an item no longer fits the criteria in a curriculum, it should be considered for weeding.

Relocation – If the school library collection is moving, it makes sense to weed the collection beforehand. Do not move items that aren't useful to patrons. When unwanted items are eliminated from the school library, “you will find that you have created a more attractive collection and an orderly, neat environment” (Bishop, 2007, p. 125).

Why Is Weeding Neglected In Many School Libraries?

Weeding is a process that is often neglected in many libraries. There are several factors that contribute to the neglect, one of which is a simple misunderstanding of why it is so important. Doll and Barron (2002) think it may be an issue of simple terminology. It has been referred to as discarding, tossing, and cleaning out. Because of the negative connotation behind these terms, many people tend to avoid the job (p. 59).

Avoiding weeding could simply be a matter of not being able to part with a resource to which the teacher-librarian has connections. Perhaps she purchased the items herself, spending time researching the item and relating it to curricular documents. Maybe the items were donations from an outside organization. Sometimes teacher-librarians have difficulty removing an item that they used when they were classroom teachers.

A major reason why teacher- librarians do not weed as often as they should is a lack of time. Teacher-librarians may feel that they do not have the time to analyze each item, checking for the factors listed above. It is a time-consuming

job. Teacher-librarians are often spread thin throughout a school, with various teaching duties and a lack of school library support personnel.

Regardless of the reason for wanting to keep an item, teacher-librarians cannot let personal bias stand in the way of a school library's functionality. "If you are frugal, don't let your own personal frugality get in the way. Providing outdated, unappealing resources to students is a disservice" (Anderson, 2010, p.28).

Bishop (2007) provides other reasons and excuses for avoiding weeding:

- Books are sacred objects; only vandals destroy books.
- Someone may need this in the future.
- There will be a scene if a teacher wants this item.
- I don't have time to remove the bibliographic record.
- Our policy doesn't justify the removal of materials bought with public funds.
- I cannot decide when a fiction title is out of date.
- Kits are expensive to replace.
- We don't want to learn how to use a new software program. (p. 124)

How Do You Plan To Weed A Collection?

"Weeding is another part of collection development and another task worthy of inclusion in the media center's policies and procedures manual" (Anderson, 2010, p. 29). Weeding is an ongoing process, not just limited to a certain season or time within a school calendar year. It can be considered anytime. "There's no time to weed! It is hard to find a chunk of time to methodically go through the collection shelf by shelf, but there is time to weed as you go along" (Anderson, 2010, p. 29). It all begins with a plan. You must know what you have in order to know what you need to keep and what needs to be weeded out.

The first step in weeding a collection is to look through a collection policy. Become familiar with the goals and plan of the school or school division. Policies should include information such as “who is responsible for weeding the collection, the criteria for weeding materials, and what is done with weeded materials” (Bishop, 2007, 121).

Are you weeding one part of the collection? Or are you weeding the entire collection? “It is important to consider what is feasible with the staff available, the structure of the weeding [plan], and the establishment of a timetable” (Doll & Barron, 2002, p.62). It is best to find the section that is most in need of weeding. It may not be necessary to complete the entire collection right away.

Study the strengths and weaknesses of the current collection by asking several questions. Loertscher and Wimberley (2009) suggest asking questions such as, what is the size of the current collection? How has the collection changed? What is the condition of the current collection? What is the quality of the collection? How does this collection compare to others in the division? (p. 43). Look at the data and circulation records to analyze school library statistics if available.

Collection mapping is a popular evaluation technique for school libraries. “Collection mapping is a visual display of the strengths and weaknesses of a school library collection. Sometimes the entire collection is mapped, while in other instances specific areas of the collection are mapped” (Bishop, 2007, p. 155). Bishop (2007) also suggests that “you may want to create mini-maps for one area of the collection each year and create a mini-map project for that area” (p. 155).

There are advantages and disadvantages of creating a collection map. Although the process is time-consuming, it can be read easily. Data may be difficult to understand and assistance may be needed make an appropriate plan. However, collection mapping can be used to get an overall view of the collection or part of a collection and in turn, kick off the plan to begin weeding the collection.

Once the plan is in place, the teacher-librarian may want to recruit some helpers. Discuss the plan with staff and find reliable volunteers that will understand the process and be supportive in updating the current school library

collection. Discuss a timeline and ensure that everyone is available and in agreement with the plan. Bishop (2007) suggests the need to collect sturdy boxes and the other necessary materials such as labels, tape, and writing tools. (p. 217)

If there is not a set policy and procedures manual dealing with weeding, make a plan for what to do with the weeded materials. “In some cases, the items can be recycled or there may be usable materials that can be transferred to another school or given to an organization” (Bishop, 2007, p. 125). Box up the items and do some research and inquiry before disposing of the unwanted items. Are they supposed to be kept for archiving purposes? Are they sent to the division office for disposal? Can they be sold in a community sale? Are records kept of the discarded items? Policies should outline this information; however, if the information is not found within a policy, division staff should be contacted.

What Are Some Potential Issues With Weeding?

Teacher-librarians are responsible for the collection of items and the removal of items. When it comes time to weed a collection, they may notice that some items purchased have not been as useful as expected. Perhaps they didn't suit curriculum or the needs of the patrons after all. “Acknowledge to yourself and your colleagues that you've made selection mistakes” (Young, 2009, para. 4).

“Some libraries have to discard hundreds of thousands of books annually, which presents a sometimes major problem: public relations” (Robinson, 2010, p. 47). Any time educational materials are discarded, there is potential for people to question the action. Teachers, administration, parents, students and even other teacher-librarians may have connections to the materials and question the idea of the removing them.

Being proactive and anticipating problems will ensure that justification is in place. “Collection reevaluation (weeding), though essential, can be one of the most controversial aspects of collection development” (Doll & Barron, 2002, p. 60). This is why it is so imperative that libraries have policies and procedures around this task. They serve as support for justifying the weeding process.

“Complaints from staff about throwing out good books or tales of trash cans filled with discarded books and videos returned to media centers are not unheard of. Be prepared to explain that there's a difference between being in love with books and being in love with content” (Anderson, 2010, p.28). Show patrons the types of items that are being removed. If the people who question weeding are shown the items that are beyond repair or items that are inappropriate to the collection, the weeding will be justified.

Knowing school library patrons, the school curricula and the potential of the materials will have a significant effect on which materials to keep and which ones to eliminate.

Conclusion

Regardless of emotional ties to materials, weeding needs to occur. It will enhance the current collection and allow more room for newly purchased, relevant items. Research the school division or school policies. Analyze the current collection. Know school library patrons and be prepared for possible issues. “With rapidly changing information, it is especially [important] to keep the collection current and reliable; getting rid of the old is just as important as acquiring the new” (Klopfer, n.d., para. 1). After removing your “weeds”, the blossoming school library will continue to flourish.

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