

'Look for me in the whirlwind'

By Dr Ross J. Todd

At the [International Association of School Librarianship Conference in Kingston Jamaica August 2011](#), I gave an invited plenary address titled: '*Look for Me in the Whirlwind*': *Teaching the 21st Century Learner*. The statement '*Look for Me in the Whirlwind*' was made by Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a journalist and publisher, and a strong, vocal and controversial leader in Jamaica's journey to social and racial equality, human rights and improved working and living conditions. He challenged all: 'Our union must know no clime, boundary, or nationality . . . let us hold together under all climes and in every country . . .'. In his powerful example of actively participating in this journey, he declared: 'Look for me in the whirlwind' (official website: <<http://www.marcusgarvey.com>>) and urged all Jamaicans to be of one accord, to engage in the discussion, the debate and the controversy as part of defining and re-engineering a bright future for the country. He did not promise that this would be an easy journey, rather, a whirlwind. Whirlwinds, as we know, arise out of instabilities and turbulence, they can be powerful and unstoppable, have potential for and often generate enormous damage, and in their wake, provide opportunities for significant reform.

There is a sense that at this time in the history and development of school libraries, a whirlwind challenges us, characterised by financial and budgetary woes, the cost of maintaining infrastructure and personnel, the perception that they are an unnecessary budget item in the wake of the vast quantities of information on the internet, and sometimes the perceived invisibility of the connection of school libraries to learning outcomes. It is a painful and emotional journey for some. This whirlwind provides significant opportunities for school library leaders to question the future, to reimagine and reengineer a preferred future, and to be part of the whirlwind. In the words of the American social reformer Frederick Douglass: "It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake". (http://thinkexist.com/quotation/it_is_not_light_that_we_need-but_fire-it_is_not/206380.html).

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia's report: *School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in 21st Century Australia* is an extraordinary opportunity for school librarians across Australia to participate in a whirlwind of the best kind. It enables the imagining and creation of significant educational opportunities for students growing up in a wired, connected and information-intense world. As the Committee reported, it "hopes that this report goes some way toward highlighting teacher-librarians' concerns; showcases their valuable contributions to educational outcomes in Australian schools; and starts to examine their evolving role and place in Australia's education system". This is clearly an invitation to be deeply and concertedly involved in the recreation of the future of learning through school libraries. The challenge is for you to be part of the whirlwind. Indeed, several of them. And it is a challenge for all teacher-librarians to claim: 'Look for me in the whirlwind'.

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There are some important whirlwinds that arise, as I see it, from the report. To me the most significant is perhaps a 'whirlwind' of data and evidence. Recommendation 5 states

that the Commonwealth Government initiate an Australian-based longitudinal study into the links between library programs, literacy (including digital literacy) and student achievement, including their impact on improving outcomes for socioeconomically disadvantaged students,

and Recommendation 6 seeks evidence to

demonstrate to the school community the valuable work that teacher-librarians are doing in respect of e-learning in their schools, including those that highlight their leadership capacity.

The challenge is for teacher-librarians to articulate a learning-centered vision for the development of students as creative, capable producers of knowledge and problem solvers through their engagement with the information in all its forms, across multiple platforms and media, utilising a multiplicity of tools, learning objects, and networks in collaborative learning

environments. At the heart of this vision is articulating a creative pedagogy centered on inquiry which makes explicit the work that teacher-librarians engage in, with particular focus on the context of a networked digital environment.

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There is however an additional challenge. As I examine a vast array of documents about school libraries, mission and vision statements, role statements and the like, they typically express what teacher-librarians do. This is important. But we have to go beyond the plethora of statements that articulate the doings. We are drowning in them. They swirl around us like a whirlwind.

There is somehow the implicit assumption that through all of this

doing, significant learning and life outcomes are achieved, that our students are developing as digital citizens, competent information and knowledge producers, and ethical information users. They may well be. The profession is articulate in making the assumption that actions and processes undertaken by teacher-librarians automatically imply positive learning outcomes, whatever they are.

The inquiry challenges teacher-librarians at their local school level to develop portfolios of powerful evidence, starting with careful evidence and learning claims derived from their collaborative instruction with teachers. I have been speaking about evidence-based practice now for some eleven years. It was of great interest to me that the report focused on this at some length. The report's discussion began where I have been focused for many years:

While there is no standard approach to evidence-based practice and strategies can vary from school to school, it is essentially about creating assignments that tie the library to the classroom curriculum. . . . While planning lessons, teacher-librarians need to clearly identify what they are teaching and prove how their methods are successful. The documentation might take the form of samples of students' work, surveys or test scores (p. 42).

This is about how students develop knowledge of their curriculum content, and our need to tie these outcomes to the instructional interventions that the collaborative teams use.

It is my view that as school libraries transform into Learning Commons, iCentres, Knowledge Centres or the like, the development of evidence-based strategies and tools for charting knowledge-based outcomes is a serious imperative. The development of individual school portfolios of evidence is a serious imperative. Regional, state and national school library associations have a key role here, particularly in providing infrastructures to enable local evidence to be aggregated, analysed and synthesised, so that important claims of outcomes can be made. At the heart of re-imagining and re-engineering school libraries as visible and essential entities in schools, the central dynamics of inquiry-based learning, research-based pedagogy, teacher-librarians as co-teachers will have resonance and salience, only when there is strong evidence of learning outcomes. Will you be part of the whirlwind?

References

Garvey, Marcus; Jacques-Garvey, Amy (Editor) (1986) *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey or Africa for the Africans*, Dover (Mass.): Majority Press.

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