We were the glue: Contributions, compromises, and continuing concerns of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

(Purpose) This study examined a criterion-based sample of high school librarians who met AASL's definition of effective school library practice to uncover how they translated their professional practices during COVID-19. **(Methods)** Three instruments were used to compare pre-COVID-19 school librarian practice with its evolution during two specific points during the pandemic. High School Librarian Survey 1 (Pre-COVID) (S1) provided a baseline view into the pre-COVID-19 practice of purposively sampled participants; open-ended Survey 2 (S2) and a follow-up focus group (FG) uncovered their practice at two specific points during the crisis and explored how librarians' priorities shifted. **(Results)** The instruments which collected librarian perceptions, revealed that while librarians supported and contributed to their learning communities in essential ways, they were also forced to compromise their priorities. Librarians furthered their leadership roles, supported learning communities, exhibited resilience and integrity, and worked to assure equitable access to learning tools and reading materials. Yet, these efforts went largely unreported. Limited contact with teacher partners and classrooms compromised librarians' engagement with information literacy and inquiry instruction. **(Implications)** Recommendations for future research include exploring how recognized gaps in information literacy learning and instruction may have been recovered since the pandemic and how school librarians' roles may have shifted and been impacted by the pandemic. **(Resources)** Research instruments are collected on this LibGuide.
https://comminfo.libguides.com/FirstYearsFrames/ResearchInstruments

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the way school librarians managed their programs. Services were interrupted due to the shift to remote learning. Librarians faced many challenges, such as losing physical space and individual interaction with students. Emergency learning did, however, offer librarians opportunities to enhance their collaborative relationships with administrators and colleagues and to apply their innovative skills using educational technology. This study examined how school librarians translated their practice during the COVID-19 pandemic and asked: In what ways did effective certified school librarians respond to a crisis situation to support their learning communities? The research team explored this question by examining the translated practices of a selected group of 11 librarians vetted for their effective programs.

2. Literature Review

As the body of literature on the COVID-19 event grew, a picture of impacted school library practice emerged. To fully explore these impacts, it was important to first uncover pre-pandemic expectations for effective school library practice before examining the research relating to teaching and learning in pandemic times and the impact of COVID-19 on school librarian practice.

2.1 School librarian roles and effectiveness

The American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians and School Libraries* (2018b) describes professional practice structured around six Shared Foundations: Include, Inquire, Collaborate, Curate, Explore and Engage. Librarians serve their learning communities through five interconnected roles: leader,

instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator. (AASL, 2018b, p.15). The AASL Definition of an Effective School Library (2018a) includes:

- development of digital, inquiry, and other types of learning

- support of the literacy experience

- curation of up-to-date digital and print resources including open educational resources

- provision of regular professional development

- collaboration with classroom teachers

- development of student-centered learning experiences that promote inquiry and integrate technology

These standards provide a baseline for understanding and measuring any shifts in practice that may have occurred during the pandemic.

In July 2020, AASL (2020c) released *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions*, a chart that organized and explained the five previously defined roles (leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator) as they might occur in a variety of newly relevant learning conditions-face-to-face, blended, and distant (2020c). This document offered additional points of comparison for the findings of this study.

2.2. Teaching, learning, and librarians in pandemic times

As emergency learning became the norm, expectations for the amount of content that could be taught and learned decreased, while concerns of potential learning loss and student completion rates grew (Dorn et al., 2020). Early pandemic-era instruction, perhaps more accurately labeled

as "emergency remote teaching" by Hodges et al. (2020), brought the need for teachers to quickly adapt to using learning management systems and video conferencing tools to supplant their face-to-face instruction, making technology support for staff essential. Correspondingly, librarians' roles also shifted from one usually focused on technology integration and innovation, to one of more basic technology support and often distribution. AASL's *Second Snapshot* (2020d) survey reported that 71.98% of librarians offered technology support to learners, and more than 60% offered tech support to staff and parents. Similarly, in regard to online learning, Wake, et al. (2022) found that librarians "noted their primary involvement included technology troubleshooting and posting information on school resource pages" and that no school librarians in their focus group were "formally involved in building-level initiatives to support teachers or students in online learning" (p. 9).

In terms of collaboration and co-teaching of inquiry research, more than 40% of librarians reported that their colleagues either lacked the time for, or were disinterested in, collaboration or co-teaching (AASL, 2020e). Collaborations with colleagues appeared to shift from integrating digital literacy and research skills to assisting teachers with tools for delivering online content, rather than the type of collaboration associated with the Shared Foundation, Inquire. This shift was also represented by AASL's guidance, *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions* (2020c).

The quick transition to remote learning forced school librarians to prioritize meeting students' basic needs through curating digital resources, providing virtual guidance to faculty, and finding

creative ways to meet literacy needs (Mardis, 2020). AASL's series of snapshot surveys

documented librarians' perceptions on how the pandemic affected their practice. Among the

priorities librarians listed were helping classroom teachers shift to a virtual environment, often

involving technology training and support. Librarians responded to colleagues' needs with a

variety of services, most frequently responding with resource curation and sharing technology

tools for "classroom" instruction (84.89%), virtual assistance (82.06%), expanding online

resources: (80.37%), and virtual meetings/collaborative events (74.29%) (AASL, 2020b). Despite

efforts to assist their learning communities with online learning, librarians felt underutilized,

due to "stakeholders misperceptions of their roles" (Wake, et al., 2022, p. 1).

In the second AASL snapshot survey of 975 librarians, participants overwhelmingly reported

engaging in a variety of reading development activities (74.61%) with far fewer listing activities

like co-teaching with other educators (46.37%), research (42.27%), digital resource training

(36.12%), or social/emotional learning support (35.02%). These school librarians assumed

leadership roles in such areas as curating materials for instruction (84.94%), providing virtual

assistance (81.11%), expanding online resources (79.75%), facilitating collaborative meetings

and professional development (77.53%), and providing technology support (71.98%) (AASL,

2020d).

In the third snapshot, librarians reported focusing on curating online resources and offering

remote support for accessing online resources. Some school librarians reported developing

virtual reading opportunities and extended check out periods. A few school librarians reported

delivering materials to students either in-person, via curbside pick-up, or by mail (AASL, 2020e).

In AASL's *Back-to-School Survey* (2020b), participants reported concerns regarding sustaining

students' research and digital citizenship skills during remote learning.

Other studies illustrated how school librarians, uniquely positioned to serve entire learning

communities, played crucial roles during COVID-19. A *School Library Journal* survey (Witeveen,

2020) revealed that getting books to students was the number one priority of the respondents.

Librarians surveyed reported leveraging their technology skills to support teachers in integrating

content and creating engagement. Others saw opportunities for relationship building in

addressing teachers' needs. Librarians stepped-up their focus on equity impacts, supported

literacies, and attacked potential learning loss in various ways such as ensuring access to

technology, checking on students' well-being, and connecting families to community resources

for food and employment information (Mackley & Lister, 2021). Mackley and Chrastka (2020)

synthesized several surveys and reported that school librarians' supported parents and

caregivers, helped to uproot educational inequities, and met the needs of learners in a virtual

environment by offering "resources and tools at their point of need to bridge achievement gaps,

develop agency, and strengthen the learning culture" (p.14).

Despite these efforts, Wake, et al. (2022) focus group findings illuminated how although school

librarians "inserted themselves into informal school structures when they saw the opportunity,"

the pandemic was a "missed opportunity to take advantage of the skills and knowledge of SLs

[school librarians] as specialists" (p.10).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the researchers sought to uncover the experiences of a specific group of librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three instruments (two surveys and one focus group) were used. The first survey (S1) was part of a larger study conducted pre-COVID on effective school library programs and college readiness (Valenza, et al., 2022). Descriptive data and qualitative responses from this first survey (S1) offered the researchers a baseline for comparing pre-and mid-pandemic professional practice. To reach a fuller understanding of the impact of the pandemic on school library practice and implications for future practice, the researchers employed a mid-pandemic survey (S2) and a focus group (FG) to collect data that would convey an overall essence of the lived experiences of these librarians. The qualitative strategy used here has been found effective in library and information science research (Budd, 2012; Ford, 2020; Lin, 2017; VanScoy and Evenstad, 2015) and has been used in other studies on school librarians and COVID-19 (Wake, et al., 2022) .

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that the sample of school librarians reflected specific characteristics within the wider population (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the researchers identified librarians meeting the standard for effective practice according to AASL's Definition of an Effective School Library (2018a). Of the 16 respondents, 11 fully met the criteria on a rubric based on AASL's definition. All but one of the librarians worked at public high schools in one state in the United States, serving students ages 14 through 18, with one serving at a

vocational/technical school. Ten of the 11 librarians reported maintaining updated library websites where they pointed to digital resources and offered IL instruction. Selected librarians served schools of populations that ranged from 500 to more than 2000 students. This sample was initially identified for a study examining first-year students' experiences with research and college libraries (Valenza, et al., 2022). The research team recognized that this existing sample might be effectively leveraged to understand the effects of the pandemic on professional practice.

3.3 Data collection

Three instruments were used to capture a picture of pre-COVID-19 school librarian practice as well as from two specific points during the crisis. High School Librarian Survey 1 (Pre-COVID) (S1) provided a view into the pre-COVID-19 practice of participants; Survey 2 (S2) and a focus group (FG) uncovered practice during the pandemic.

Prior to COVID-19 disruptions, the participants completed the High School Librarians Survey (S1). In this pre-COVID survey, the librarians described their professional practices and library resources, their professional preparation, efforts and experiences relating to professional development and instructional collaboration, the level of their involvement in information literacy and inquiry instruction, and the degree of the presence of up-to-date digital and print materials and technology in their programs. This survey was initially designed to offer insights regarding ways high school librarians prepared students for academic research. Accordingly, the survey questions aimed at understanding how librarians might have addressed both the Shared

Foundations of the AASL National School Library Standards (2018b) and the Association of

College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education

Research (2015) to better understand the high school/college transition.

Survey 2 (S2) captured data about this sample of school librarians and their practices during the

three months of crisis and quarantine, from March to June 2020. This survey consisted of six

open-ended questions examining how librarians pivoted to translate their programs in the face

of the initial COVID-19 school closings.

Connaway and Radford (2021) noted that while library researchers cannot use focus group

interviews to generalize, they can be used to better understand perceptions and attitudes of a

target population. To fully uncover the lived experiences of these effective high school librarians

during a crisis situation when remote or hybrid learning became the norm, this study required

interactive conversations that might reveal consensus and sentiment. The focus group (FG)

convened with five participants as they approached the uncertain opening of school in Fall

2020.

3.4 Data analysis

The High School Librarian Survey Pre-COVID-19 (S1) offered a baseline for comparison with the

two COVID-19 period instruments--Survey 2 (S2) and the focus group (FG). The focus group was

recorded via Zoom and transcribed. At the first inductive examination of data, preliminary codes

were assigned based on occurrences of actions (Bernard and Bernard, 2013; Saldaña, 2016).

These initial inductive codes emerged in a bottom-up approach as the research team reviewed survey text and focus group transcriptions, revealing themes that related to participants' contributions and compromises in their professional practices. In addition, protocol coding (Saldaña, 2016) allowed the researchers to connect participant responses to the established and familiar school librarians roles and Shared Foundations. Following each team member's independent reading and tagging of the transcript, the team collaborated developing a codebook, reaching consensus on and testing the themes. Two researchers tested for intercoder reliability.

4. Limitations

The use of a criterion-based sample narrowed the scope of this study, limiting the generalizability of the results. Surveys based on participant self-assessments naturally result in data that are dependent upon the accuracy of those assessments. This threat to internal validity is controlled through the use of the focus group to clarify survey results regarding changes to practices due to COVID-19. In noting the inability to generalize focus group results, Connaway and Radford (2021) pointed out that they do "give one the opportunity to consider a range of responses to questions" (p. 363). The findings from the three instruments thus provide before and during pandemic snapshots of effective school library practice of a specific group of vetted librarians.

5. Findings

What follows is a description of the baseline established in pre-COVID-19 (S1) and librarians' experiences during the pandemic (S2 and FG) in the form of contributions and compromises viewed through the lens of AASL's established, interconnecting, and overlapping roles--Instructional Partner, Teacher, Leader, Information Specialist, and Program Administrator (AASL, 2018b), and their interpretation in AASL's *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions* (AASL, 2020c).

5.1 Pre-COVID-19 (Survey 1)

Initially developed for use in a study on the high school to college transition, this Pre-COVID-19 survey collected information from the sample identified as meeting the criteria for effective school library practice. These data provided a baseline to which data from Survey 2 (S2) and the focus group (FG) could be compared. Among our sample, all participants earned ALA-accredited Masters degrees. Nine of the 11 librarians reported commitment to either often or very often incorporating AASL National School Library Standards (2018b) in instructional planning. While ten reported maintaining regularly updated library websites, prior to COVID, only two of the 11 librarians used their schools' learning management systems. The top tasks reported by the majority were working with students and planning with teachers.

Open-ended questions offered a wider lens into pre-COVID-19 instructional practice. For instance, one librarian described a focus on empowering learners to use technology ethically and creatively: "My lessons focus on their property and rights as creators as much or more so

than their role in respecting others' intellectual property . . . They are also much more interested in learning about copyright this way" (S1). Pre-COVID, librarians also described engagement in leading professional development in such areas as educational technologies, best practices, research skills, and mindfulness. These included summer workshops and training for new faculty. Two were responsible for teaching for-credit courses.

In pre-COVID-19 practice, the 11 librarians ranked their instructional priorities from a list of 42 information literacy skills commonly listed across standards, texts and previous studies. Instructional practices related to the Shared Foundation Inquire ranked the highest. Figure 1 lists instructional practices that are ranked as "priority" or "high priority" relating to the Shared Foundation Inquire.
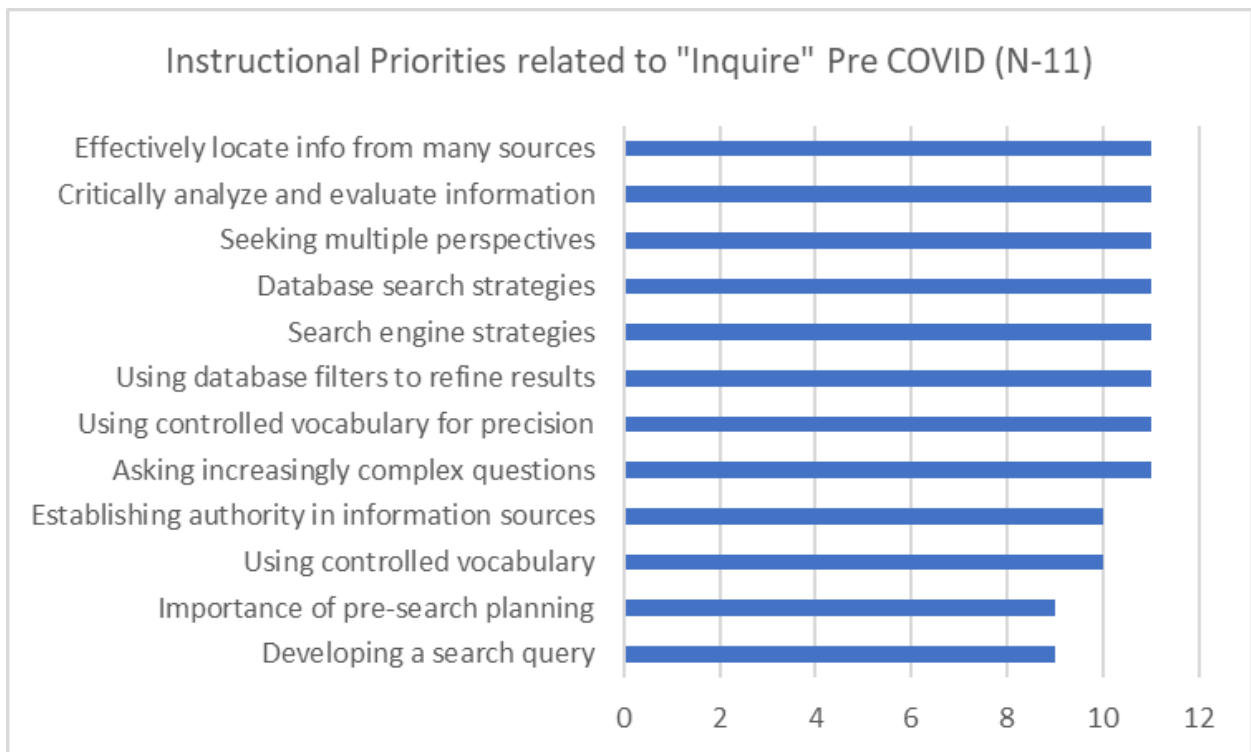

Figure 1: Inquire Instructional Priorities

For all 11 participants, their highest ranked instructional priorities included that their students

can effectively locate information from many sources, critically analyze and evaluate

information, seek multiple perspectives, use database and search engine strategies, use

database filters to refine results and use controlled vocabulary for more precise searching, and

ask increasingly complex questions. Next in their ranked priorities was that learners could

establish authority in information sources and use controlled vocabulary. Rounding out high

priorities for their learners, the librarians pointed to the importance of pre-search planning, and

the ability to develop a search query.

Administrative tasks came second in priority among seven of the eleven participants, while four

reported planning the library program to be next in rank. Prior to COVID-19, six of the 11

participants reported not having any responsibilities outside the library. All participants

reported curating for their learning communities in our pre-COVID-19 survey. Ten of the 11

librarians reported regularly updating their websites and being responsible for curating and

communicating with their communities using a variety of digital platforms. These librarians saw

themselves as guides for students and staff in scouting for, recommending, and demonstrating

digital resources for use in learning.

5.2 During COVID-19 (Survey 2 and Focus Group): Contributions

Findings collected at the outset of the pandemic (S2) and, a few months later at the start of the

subsequent school term (FG), granted a view into the contributions of these librarians in their

school situations. All but one of the librarians described their teaching situation as completely remote (S2). New to their practice were safety protocols relating to materials and physical space. They developed strategies for quickly shifting their investments to digital resources and establishing new procedures for circulating print resources. They strengthened collaborations with community partners, most notably their local public libraries. They addressed equity disparities in their communities concerning access to wifi, bandwidth, and device distribution. They worked to mitigate such existing barriers as email restrictions and the confusion caused by required multiple sign-ons for databases and software subscriptions. "The barriers that we're seeing right now are barriers that should never really have existed to begin with" (FG).

Among school librarians' efforts during the pandemic, the Shared Foundation, Curate, warrants special attention. AASL's *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions* noted the importance of curating quality resources to meet community needs, developing innovative communication strategies, sharing videos and resources lists with educators to highlight grade-appropriate and curriculum-relevant databases, digital resources, and OER with appropriate accessibility features (AASL 2020c, 5). Librarians found that some of the resources they had already created became newly valuable and that when their faculties had knowledge of existing resources and databases they more confidently managed remote learning aspects of their instruction independently.

The librarians reported collaborating with teachers and administrators to meet the educational needs of students and advocating for equity of access. They provided technical support to their school community and fulfilled tasks such as curating instructional media online, creating

resources for students and teachers, and engaging in professional development, especially for unfamiliar digital learning platforms.

In our focus group at the start of the 2020-21 school year, school settings continued to be largely remote with four schools reporting hybrid "rotations" with very few students actually present for the offered face-to-face classes. Librarians connected with classroom teachers to determine the appropriate adaptations necessary to meet the demands of remote learning and whether they could resume student inquiry projects. Existing collaborative relationships allowed them to have some say in the shift to emergency learning and provided the opportunity to produce digital instruction for classes, helping them "to stay relevant" by "keeping lines of communication open was very important, both for academic collaboration and support and for moral support" (S2).

All saw opportunities to use their skills to support overwhelmed colleagues and other district librarians in adapting to digital instruction and acquiring ebook collections. Librarians reported teachers' growing reliance on their technology expertise and described attending to the emotional needs of the teachers and often "talking them down off the ledge" (S2). Librarians also became more involved in virtual professional development by either volunteering or being assigned by their administrators to make sure the faculty was prepared, "When Zoom access was extended to schools, our administration jumped on board immediately and put us in charge of training the staff" (S2).

Creating and regularly updating websites was a key strategy adopted by the librarians to support their learning communities. A robust library website also became a critical tool for

supporting instruction. Library websites hosted online catalogs and served as hubs for databases, ebook collections, citation tools, recommended apps, and digital tools for sharing student and faculty work, as well as online support resources like screencast tutorials and recorded orientations. Librarians reported using tools like Screencastify, Loom, and WeVideo for video production and planned to continue to use them as they moved into the fall semester (S2).

Participants also reported partnering with their schools' instructional coaches, the technology team, and guidance. In these partnerships, the five focus group librarians reported that colleagues saw them as trusted and consistently available professionals and advocates who understood their needs and provided critical continuity. The librarians addressed the needs of special learners by assisting special education departments in finding software to support their programs. Organizing a new county chapter was another form of collaboration that one librarian reported, "Doing this helped me find a community of supportive individuals" (S2). Collaborative relationships established during COVID-19 led to the growth of one participant's professional agency: "My reputation is, if I say I can do it, I will find a way. It is sometimes hard to maintain this remotely, but I have been successful so far. I look forward to having a voice in the next stages as we plan for reopening" (S2). One librarian reported that their administrators recognized their value when they worked to create whole-school virtual events and address whole-school issues. "My principal and my admin team know that they can throw something at me and I can figure out how to deal with it. It was a big win" (FG).

Several librarians discussed supporting student learning by communicating schoolwide. One utilized an online newsletter that provided access to essential components of the library such as "links to interesting and educational videos, book suggestions, videos of my own book reviews, as well as wholesome online activities" (S2) along with school programs and resources to help students deal with the challenges of staying at home. Some librarians leveraged social media to communicate. One remarked, "Our social media presence has also given us a place to support our community during this confusing time" (S2).

Before COVID-19 disruption, only one of the eleven participants reported being actively engaged in technology support (S1). Librarians reported offering technology professional development opportunities for staff whether through "part of a program for pushing out technology support and information to staff monthly" or as summer training opportunities and other professional learning sessions (S1). This situation changed dramatically over quarantine months and during reopening as our sample of librarians from the second survey and the focus group reported leading most of their schools' technology support efforts that were focused heavily on technology use and integration. This responsibility often included leading school-wide efforts such as distributing hardware. Librarians responded to emergency texts, supported migration to learning management systems, and utilized video and chat software to respond to students' questions. They learned and promoted new platforms and taught others to effectively use them, "My biggest opportunity to lead was through that tech support and helping each teacher figure out what they were comfortable doing in that crisis" (FG). These librarians also discovered efficiencies in supporting faculty and staff, such as frequently asked questions via email, "as it is likely that others are also having this problem" (S2), and

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establishing form-based support systems. One librarian's technology support form transformed into a forum that "wasn't just about technology. It turned into a forum that was a lot of what they needed, and in some cases, it was just to vent and say 'I don't like this and I don't want to do this anymore'" (FG). In this sense, deeper student connections were made.

Focus group librarians described using tools like Google's JamBoard to encourage group sharing. They used announcement tools like Remind, texts, and email to personally introduce themselves, provide reference services, share tips on new services, and point to newly created instructional screencasts. Several of the librarians surveyed shared that the introduction of Flip provided, as one noted, "students with a space to share their learning and respond to their peers without staring at a screen of 24 other students" (S2).

5.3 During COVID-19 (Survey 2 and Focus Group): Compromises

As some librarians became partners in providing tech support to their colleagues, they also faced instructional design challenges and compromises arising from the move to online teaching and learning. While a few reported district level involvement in developing protocols for remote lesson structure, others described struggling to transform live lessons into recorded format, chunking instruction to fit altered class lengths, balancing lecture with guided activities and independent work, and creating formative assessments. Once their technological skills were recognized, their responsibilities shifted: "At first it was challenging to keep on the administration's radar, but once they realized that I was a "go-to" person in remote learning I was overwhelmed with responsibilities and requests. I have more work now than I can manage, which is a good problem to have" (S2).

The pre-COVID-19 survey (S1) revealed consensus prioritization around instruction, inquiry, and collaboration. Like their classroom teacher colleagues, librarians who were actively teaching faced the challenges of developing effective instruction for multiple formats and engaging learners. However, the very practices that librarians held most dear in terms of their professionalism were compromised in ways that classroom teachers' practice were not: the librarians' value was highly contingent upon their ability to push in and integrate. Instruction was curtailed by a variety of logistical factors, including limited informal access to teachers and learners and lack of awareness of upcoming projects. The typical individual, over-the-shoulder opportunities to guide learners were far less possible. Participants echoed one another's concerns about feeling siloed. They expressed dismay regarding their limited opportunities to

connect and their compromised opportunities to teach. One remarked, "*convincing people of what we do is harder in this environment*" (FG). Librarians expressed serious concern regarding being left out of the learning loop. In the words of one participant:

In terms of instruction, I really missed that face-to-face opportunity, because so much of what I did was because I was there and available. And I could say "Oh, I'll just come in for five minutes and help you." They're less likely to invite me to pop into their online classes. And a lot of times, it's because they think they don't need me. And I don't know what they're doing. Because we don't have that opportunity to communicate (FG).

Mirroring AASL's Back-to-School Survey (2020b), librarians in this study shared concerns regarding sustaining students' research skills during remote learning. With a narrowed curriculum and pressure to do it all in multiple teaching formats, larger inquiry projects were sacrificed. Librarians expressed frustration at not being able to get face-to-face time with students, and receiving limited or no feedback from classroom teacher partners on their recorded and embedded contributions to learning. This left some feeling uncertain of their instructional success. One reported, "So even though I'm getting my content across . . . I feel like I don't know what the kids are getting out of it" (FG). A common concern expressed was that faculty reliance on librarians' recorded resources might limit librarians' future opportunities in the classroom: "My English department is supremely confident and therefore doesn't need me, in their eyes" (FG).

Survey 2 and the transcript of the focus group were coded for mentions of actions relating to

AASL's Shared Foundations. Figure 2 describes a shift in focus from S1 with Inquire shifting to a

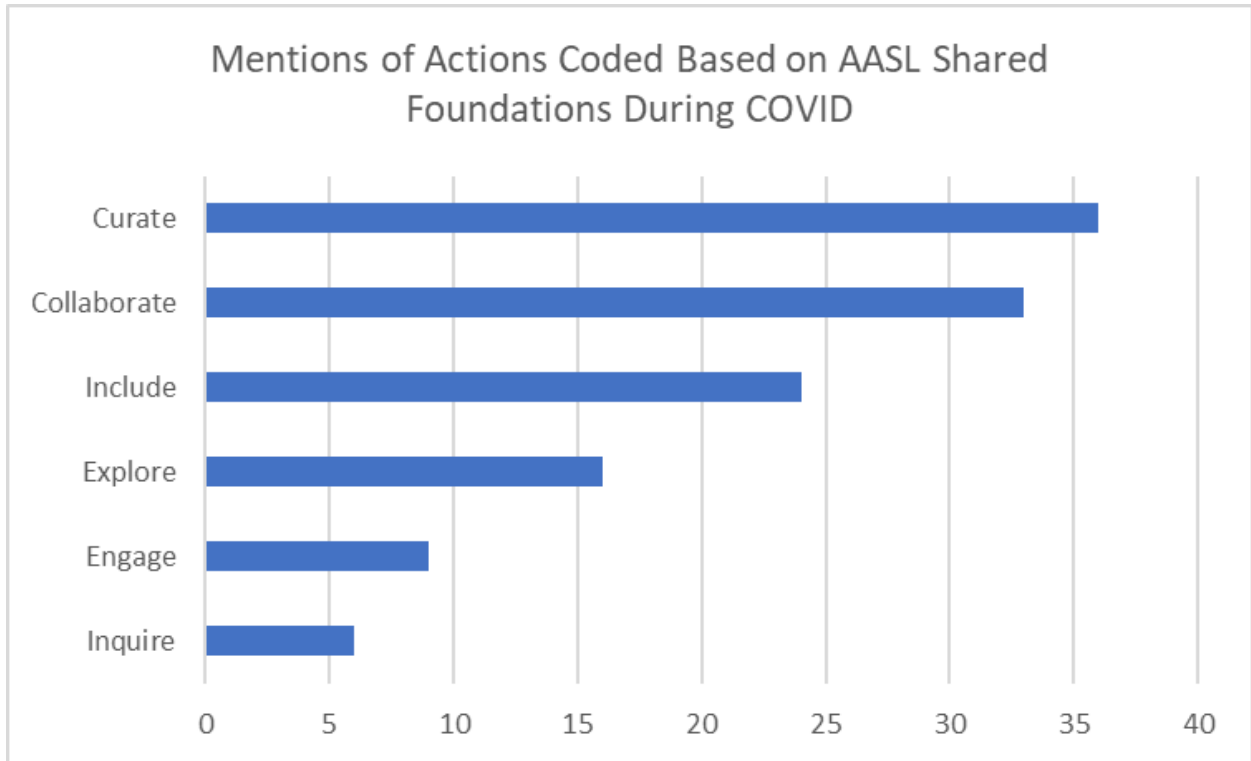lower priority in relationship to the more prevalent Foundations Curate and Collaborate.

Figure 2: Shared Foundations coded in Survey 2 (N-11) and Focus Group (N=5)

Librarians were disappointed that many students did not choose to reach out for help, complete

work, or attend online sessions. One librarian who offered informal Zoom lunchtime meetings

had no students interested in joining. Some expressed concerns about academic honesty and

considered how they might collaborate with classroom teachers to address potential issues.

Disappointed with lack of student engagement, one librarian considered what an online student

book talk project might feel like on the student end:

    I thought about myself as a ninth grader, and I thought, Oh, my God, this would be a

nightmare for me. I would never want to talk on camera, I would not want to talk in a

breakout group where I didn't know everybody, I would just sit there and hope that the

teacher checked my attendance because I'm actually on the screen. (FG)

The sudden nature of the COVID-19 shutdown affected the level of preparedness librarians felt

for serving their students and faculty colleagues with reading materials. While some were

grateful for their relationships with neighboring public libraries and celebrated their ebook

collections, others regretted that they had not developed and promoted these collections far

earlier. While 10 of the 11 librarians maintained websites developed pre-pandemic, some

wished that these websites were far more developed and that they had encouraged students to

check out books prior to leaving school. Some wished they had integrated ebooks better, made

them more visible, and were better able to provide teachers with digital versions of desired

texts (S2).

Several librarians noted that their reading development efforts were not always successful. They

wondered whether students were not reading, or were perhaps getting books elsewhere.

Several expressed frustration about not being able to gather class sets of books to meet

teachers' demands. Quick responses in investing in digital titles did not immediately, or in all

cases, pay off. A librarian in one of the largest schools worried about meeting the needs of a

wide range of readers:

> Our students have always preferred to read physical books for pleasure and use virtual
>
> resources for research. However, the current situation has taken away student access to

our collection and shifted our purchasing trends to focus solely on ebooks and

audiobooks. Over the past several months, we have acquired over 2,500 new digital

titles. Unfortunately, the correlation to virtual access has been disappointing with a

negligible increase in readership statistics. (S2)

Among the many compromises librarians faced was the loss of their physical space. In some

cases, the library was not open to the school community, or was dedicated instead to specific

groups of faculty, seniors for college guidance, or as a hub for tech support or distribution of

hardware and textbooks. From a leadership point of view, while these increasing responsibilities

were opportunities, they also presented challenges by adding to librarians' already full plates.

6. Discussion

The qualitative approach of this study uncovered the lived experiences of school librarians

under crisis conditions. Patterns found in participants' statements addressed standards-based

expectations for professional practice across each established role: leader, instructional partner,

information specialist, teacher, and program administrator (AASL, 2020c) The COVID-19 survey

(S2) and focus group (FG) conversation revealed librarians played a vital role by helping to

ensure students had equitable access to technology and technology support. These practices

correlated with data captured in both the AASL Snapshots (AASL, 2020d and 2020e), the SLJ

survey (Witeveen, 2020) and Wake, et al. (2022). In their efforts, librarians established and

collaborated with new partners, including their IT departments, guidance counselors,

administrators, and public library colleagues. The increased demand for access to online

content, digital books, tools, and hardware made curation essential to meet learner and teacher

curricular needs. In a job dependent on classroom-integrated instruction, established research projects and existing collegial relationships were critical to whether librarians could sustain instruction during COVID-19. It was clear from participant comments that many were veterans in their buildings, leveraging professional relationships.

While the Pre-COVID-19 survey (S1) painted a picture of librarians with rich, well-integrated practices and a commitment to AASL's Shared Foundations in their instruction, the librarians in our second survey (S2) and focus group (FG) described definite shifts in their practices and priorities representing both contributions and compromises.

6.1 Were librarian contributions recognized or documented?

Of serious concern is the admission that those shifted and substantial contributions of librarians went largely unreported. One focus group participant described their translated practice as providing teachers with educational resources in the form of a LibGuide, answering online questions from students and staff, screencasting lessons and posting them in Google Classroom, holding virtual book clubs, disseminating voter registration and census materials, sharing a Smore digital flyer with various library news, and creating a virtual yearbook (FG) matching AASL's *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions* (2020c). While participants recognized the necessity of communicating the full and expanded range of their services to their school communities and stakeholders, when asked, they described no formal plans for reporting on their practice during COVID-19, an activity that would align with their roles as program administrators. Aligning with Wake, et al. (2022) findings, some librarians shared concerns that their talents were underrecognized and underutilized, that some administrators

"just didn't get what I did" (FG). Another acknowledged neglecting their own role in providing evidence of their practice:

> I think documentation and assessment of our program has always been a difficult thing
>
> for me. I mean, I have database search stats, those sorts of things, but I don't think it
>
> measures, well, the culture of what we do for the students and also that we're ingrained
>
> in the curriculum (FG).

It is highly possible that evidence of COVID-era efforts by school librarians has been lost and will remain unacknowledged or even unnoticed by colleagues and administrators.

6.2 Shifted priorities

During the crisis, librarians demonstrated agility, adaptability and devotion to the well-being of their communities. Some articulated how the struggles encountered during COVID-19 inspired new professional goals. Some were looking to improve the usability of their library's websites, while others were planning new tactics for engagement and collaboration. Responses from the second survey and the focus group evidenced new focus on fundamental institutional needs. Pre-COVID-19, the sample described a variety of practices connected to the six AASL Shared Foundations and shared their information literacy instructional priorities, revealing inquiry as a primary focus. In the face of dramatic disruption, however, these priorities shifted.

While the librarians in the survey and focus group discussed highlights of their work during the pandemic practice, some were discouraged, and others were overwhelmed by what they perceived as a dramatic change to the professional practice and services they engaged in

pre-COVID-19. Comments ranged from missing seeing and connecting with students face-to-face to serious instructional frustration: "You know, I just can't get it across in this venue" (FG). One expressed the importance of seeking simple rewards in their shifted efforts:

> You have to find things, pockets of things, that work for you. For me, we're doing book delivery. So this week, our kids are coming for textbooks . . . I mean, for me, it was writing little notes to put on the front of the books, because then I was like, you know, it might be fun for a kid to get who's been in their house for six months to get a note from me that says, "Hey, I like this book, but tell me what you think of it. . . . That's like me trying to get my own sanity . . . and figure out what the reward is. Because there has to be one for us. It's just too awful if there's not. (FG)

Another practitioner, who expressed an impressive degree of professional creativity across the surveys and the focus group, shared a particularly poignant expression of professional loss and disillusionment in one of her focus group responses:

> It's hard to lose the pieces of this job that you really love, and be stuck with some of the pieces that you didn't really love but now everybody needs. At some point you have to ask, how long do I want to do a job that I kind of am starting to hate? (FG)

6.3 Implications for post-pandemic practice

While the small sample makes findings impossible to generalize, this study offers a snapshot of the impact of the pandemic on a selected group of effective high school librarians. Evidenced by the pre-COVID-19 survey (S1), these librarians embodied effective practice. Pre-COVID-19, they devoted time and talent to addressing the competencies described in AASL's Shared

Foundations. From March 2020 through the full 2020/2021 school year, educators' priorities shifted. During the pandemic, they focused on what mattered most to support learning in their communities. That meant organizing and providing resources (Curate), being a team player in ways they never expected as they supported the success and emotional well being of their overwhelmed colleagues, administrators, students, and parents (Collaborate), and ensuring access and equity (Include). In direct response to organizational needs, those three categories became the dominant foundations of COVID-19-era practice. The Pre-COVID-19 Survey (S1) revealed librarians significantly engaged in leading information literacy instruction and inquiry across the disciplines. At the point of the second survey and focus group, these professionals were striving to revive these efforts. Though existing projects were in the works for the next term, in many cases, more immediate school needs were still being prioritized. A few participants expressed hope about ensuring their students were reading and that research/inquiry projects would continue with their classroom teacher colleagues, but responses relating to Inquire occurred less frequently than statements relating to other Shared Foundations.

Reliant upon classroom teachers for integration into their classrooms, during COVID-19 librarians had fewer opportunities to make the types of personal and spontaneous connections that happened in hallways. They had fewer opportunities to drop in on the physical classrooms of the classroom teacher colleagues and fewer opportunities to do the face-to-face or over-the-shoulder consultations with students that some considered the joy of their work. Uncertainty about both the effectiveness and relevance of their online instruction points to

librarians' need for deeper collegial feedback and professional development in instructional design of formative assessments.

Despite shifts in organizational priorities, participants' contributions exceeded the recommendations described in AASL's School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions (2020c) in their blended and fully online learning settings. They reported on their agility in adapting to hybrid and remote situations and expressed frustration about wanting to contribute more. In retrospect, though the majority of the librarians in the sample were technology integration leaders, some of the frustrations expressed relating to scaling their curations, providing equitable access to content and tools, and creating engaging online instruction, point to the need for the elimination of barriers like passwords to digital resources, greater interoperability across vendor platforms. In addition librarians would benefit from a more robust digital presence, and wider preservice and inservice preparation for online pedagogy.

Leadership priorities also shifted. These librarians approached dramatic disruptions with creativity and energy as they supported emergency remote teaching schoolwide in ways similar to those recognized by Wake, et al. (2022), Mackley and Lister (2021) and Mackley and Chrastka (2020). These professionals connected communities in crisis. "...Being the glue between different groups within your building, I think really became an important skill in all this" (FG). Some led such efforts as a mid-pandemic accreditation and were responsible for highly visible whole-school events. Others worried that their valiant leadership efforts during and after hours might not have been recognized by their communities. Participants also expressed concern

about whether their newly available and amplified digital presence would limit the need for their physical instructional presence once face-to-face learning resumed.

7. Further research

While the full impact of pandemic disruption will likely not be fully understood for years to come, the effect of compromised learner access to librarians and information literacy instruction and services requires consideration. From this snapshot of practice several concerns and questions emerged as worthy for investigation:

- What roles have librarians taken in assessing and bridging gaps in post-COVID-19 learning recovery efforts?
- Have school administrators recognized librarians' mid-pandemic contributions toward continued learning and community access and equity? Were those efforts effectively documented? What types of advocacy efforts will be necessary to ensure school communities recognize these substantial efforts? In the light of Lance and Kachel's 2021 SLIDE report, which reported a decade-long 20% loss in school librarian positions pre-pandemic, documentation and recognition seem particularly critical.
- Has the reliance on librarians for technology support and administrative tasks continued as additional responsibilities in a post-pandemic landscape?
- In what ways have librarians' COVID-19-period curation efforts continued as a valuable service supporting learning?

- How has the developing digital tool fluency of students and faculty impacted teaching and learning and the ways school libraries, (physical and digital), are being used?

- Revelations emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic included pre-existing barriers to digital content access. How are librarians using this learning to ensure easier access across digital silos? How are librarians mitigating the password jungle to prevent frustration?

- How has the limited engagement of learners in inquiry at the high school level during COVID-19 impacted first-year college students?

8. Conclusions

Rather than present an advocacy stance, this exploration offers a broader, candid lens on practice for a select sample of librarians. The use of two surveys allowed the team to compare pre- and during-pandemic practice. Using a focus group (FG) presented and confirmed a lens of lived experience. As two respondents noted, *they were the glue.* While the findings from this sample cannot be generalized, they reveal significant librarian contributions, share compromises made to professional practice, and present critical concerns to address. Most serious among these concerns is that despite exhibiting resilience as they supported their learning communities, librarians' engagement with information literacy and inquiry instruction during this period was greatly compromised. New research into school librarians' involvement in ongoing recovery efforts for inquiry learning and equitable access to resources is needed. The pragmatic approach used in this study provided a view of the lived experiences of school

librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic and revealed important questions essential for future

practice.

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