Beyond the Stacks

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How Librarians Support Students and Schools

By Joanna Freeman

For years, whenever I met someone who asked me what I did for a living, I simply said, "I'm a librarian in an elementary school." I had always thought of myself as a librarian first, and I also knew this was an answer people would immediately understand. Almost everyone has an idea of what the job entails, even if that impression is decades old. Cue image of a woman wearing glasses and sporting a bun, sitting behind a reference desk, shushing students, or walking between the stacks to help them find just the right book.

A few years ago, I realized that for me, answering "librarian" was the easy way out. School librarian positions were being cut right and left in districts across the country, including in my own state of Washington, touted as an easy way to save money and jobs that would not directly affect class size or student achievement. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of public school librarians in the United States dropped from 54,445 to 50,300, a nearly 8 percent reduction.[1] Over that time, it became clear to me, and to many librarians, that most people do not understand the role librarians play in our schools—and we need to correct these misunderstandings.

Today, when I am asked what I do, I say, "I am a teacher librarian in an elementary school." This response invites inquisitive looks and questions about my job, giving me the opportunity to educate people about what teacher librarians do in thousands of schools. I am putting the "teacher" part of my job ahead of the "librarian" part, though they are intertwined throughout my day. After all, I am a librarian, but I am also a teacher—a teacher of students, staff, families, and community members.

First, I must acknowledge the many different job titles for this position around the country: school librarian, library media specialist, information technology specialist, research technology specialist, and library media coordinator, just to name a few. In recent Washington state legislation, people in my position are referred to as "teacher librarians," so I now use the term to avoid confusion and because I think it better characterizes my job. Over the years, the position has changed from primarily a traditional librarian position to a balance of teaching and librarianship, and I think it's important to acknowledge that evolution.

When I was considering becoming a teacher librarian, I was encouraged by other librarians to first become a classroom teacher, so I would better understand the needs of both staff and students as a librarian. I took their advice, and I enjoyed teaching in the classroom immensely, but I still had the goal of being a librarian. I entered the Master of Library and Information Science program at the University of Washington and was hired as an elementary teacher librarian in 2002 in Washington's Shoreline School District. This is the suburban district just north of Seattle that I had attended as a child. I have taught in the same school since being hired, despite school closures, tough economic times, and the loss of many teacher librarian positions around the country, and I feel lucky to have remained in the same position without a reduction in my hours.

The five years I spent as a classroom teacher have been invaluable to me. I gained great insight into teachers and their classrooms, including teachers' stresses and concerns, and their joys and victories. I am

aware of the incredible amount of content a teacher is expected to cover in a short amount of time. I understand the difficulty of finding interesting and appropriate materials for a classroom filled with students of different reading abilities and interests. And I can understand the importance of celebrating with teachers when they have breakthroughs with their students.

My previous classroom experience directly transfers to my school library, as the library is my classroom all day, every day. But my student roster far exceeds the number of students an elementary classroom teacher interacts with. On average, I teach more than 500 students each year, from kindergarten to sixth grade, who come to school with a range of abilities and experiences with books and reading.

School library positions have evolved over the past few decades, primarily as a result of technological advances, but our main focus has not changed: providing curriculum support and teaching research and technology skills, literature appreciation, information literacy, and Internet awareness. In my school, we have a computer lab, roving laptop carts, and more than 250 classroom laptops, including one laptop per student in our fifth and sixth grades. To that end, I provide a lot of hardware and software support throughout the day, but I try not to let those technical tasks take over my time. Parents also ask for help in supporting their children's education, and teacher librarians often offer information to parent organizations about copyright information, Internet awareness and safety, book clubs, and how to help children find engaging books.

My elementary school has approximately 565 students in 23 classes, including several special education and gifted classrooms. In the course of a school day, I teach four or more 45-minute classes. During this time, I spend 30 to 35 minutes on instruction, and 10 to 15 minutes helping students find books to check out, which I also consider to be time spent teaching. Every class attends one session each week, though the library is open all day for drop-in visits by students and staff. I have some flexible time to teach outside of scheduled classes, which I do through collaborating with classroom teachers. I also leave the library to teach in the computer lab or individual classrooms when appropriate.

A Collaborative Hub

In my library classes, I cover many topics, including literature appreciation, Internet awareness and safety, research skills, effective searching techniques, copyright and plagiarism, how to cite sources, and how to find books on particular topics in the library, and I integrate my lessons with the classroom curriculum as often as possible. The class time I'm scheduled to teach is precious; as a result of mandated testing days and holidays, I teach each class an average of 30 times in a school year, for a total of about 900 minutes of instruction, or 15 hours. Achieving the outcomes I expect for each grade level while also connecting the library lessons with the curriculum so that I do not teach in isolation is difficult under these time constraints.

In my district, curriculum design is left up to individual teacher librarians, though the district's librarians meet monthly to discuss our teaching and share resources. Many of us rely on combining various sources—such as standards related to information literacy and technology skills from the American Association of School Librarians, the Common Core State Standards, and the International Society for Technology in Education Standards—and we draw upon our knowledge of students and curriculum and the needs of teachers. The freedom to design our own curriculum enables teacher librarians to work closely with teachers in their schools to integrate library skills and knowledge into the actual grade-level curriculum.

To connect library learning with classroom learning, I partner with the teachers in my school. For instance, third-grade students studying rocks and minerals need me to help them identify and pull books from the library so they can research the topic in their classrooms. A sixth-grade teacher expecting students to research ancient civilizations will ask me to teach a lesson on how to effectively search online and find relevant, appropriate, and credible sources for their projects. Fifth-grade students hosting our school's colonial fair need books and research tips to pull together their presentations. Second-grade students studying insects need help creating digital presentations, so I provide support in the computer lab as they learn to use presentation tools such as PowerPoint, and I teach a lesson on how to cite text and image sources.

Such requests happen throughout the school year and succeed thanks to open communication between classroom teachers and myself. Mutual respect and a firm understanding of how we can help and support each other and our students are critical to this kind of collaboration. Positive collaboration happens when teachers trust that the other educators they work with will keep their students' best interests in mind. We are all working together to support and teach our students, as well as to support each other.

These partnerships work well when teachers think of the library as the hub, or the heart, of the school. While some people think of a school library as simply a place to check out books or learn a lesson on the Dewey Decimal System, the teachers I work with recognize that libraries are vibrant spaces where a lot happens simultaneously: students can hear a good story, find out about a new author, research their new pet, among other things.

Just as the library is a resource for materials, books, and technology, the teacher librarian is a resource for helping in the teaching of research and reading. Questions and ideas flow into the library, and answers and support flow out into our classrooms and communities.

As I mentioned earlier, librarians think of their library as their classroom, albeit with more flexibility than a standard classroom. Our library is open throughout the school day, and students trickle in to borrow books and find resources for projects. If I am not teaching a class, I am available to help them choose that perfect book for their science fiction genre study or show them where to find the citation for a website they are using. I also help teachers find appropriate books on a specific topic to bring back to their individual classrooms for a few weeks so students have materials readily available for research.

In addition to the time teacher librarians spend with students and teachers, it is critical they have time to manage the library itself, which is often a misunderstood part of the job. Teacher librarians need time to do research, read reviews, purchase appropriate resources, and have the resources processed and available when teachers and students need them. They often write grants to support the curriculum and invite authors or illustrators to visit their schools and work with children. And they need to keep up on recent developments in both technology and materials, which many do through reading journal articles, blogs, and other online content, and by attending conferences and workshops. Being up to date on new ideas and programs is not enough; teacher librarians also need time to learn how to use and apply the programs, as well as time to share them with teachers and students.

Many districts have cut school library positions, so it is not uncommon for teacher librarians to have to drive from school to school throughout the week, with just enough time to teach a few classes before they have to leave and go to the next school. This is a grueling schedule that leaves little time to attend to other important management and professional aspects of the job. Some schools in Washington state employ a teacher librarian only one day a week, so the librarian ends up working at five different schools, without time to collaborate with teachers or determine what materials should be purchased to best support classroom instruction.

Supplementing the Curriculum

Supplementing the school's curriculum requires that I have at least some knowledge of it at all grade levels. This is difficult, especially at a time when every publisher seems to be releasing new materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). My district has recently purchased or will be purchasing new curricula in science, math, and reading. I have asked to be included in appropriate trainings for new curricula so I can have some knowledge of the topics being taught in each class, but that is not always possible due to time or cost. I know a disconnect between a new curriculum and the library program often leads to a more difficult transition for teachers, as teacher librarians scramble to catch up and provide appropriate resources or lessons in the library. I am, however, doing my best to support teachers during this move to the CCSS.

With the new standards finding a foothold in most states, their focus on nonfiction will bring renewed attention to school library collections, particularly to outdated nonfiction sections. Teachers piloting a new reading curriculum in my school have already asked me for materials to supplement their instruction. As teacher librarians, we must have the time and resources necessary to support teachers

throughout the adoption of the CCSS; we can't rely only on the appendices of the new standards. If we really want to increase both the quantity and the quality of the nonfiction our students read, teacher librarians need time to find these materials and the funding to purchase them.

Several years ago, my district's social studies curriculum changed to include the study of ancient civilizations in the sixth grade. At that time, I had very few books in the wide variety of reading levels and topics needed for up to 90 students to use the resources at the same time. My five or six books about mummies and King Tut were not going to cut it. I needed books about China, Mesopotamia, India, and other cultures to provide the breadth of understanding my teachers and students required. Their needs informed my book purchasing and budget prioritizing for the next few years, but it took time and my knowledge of the curriculum to order the right materials, and I continue to add to that collection as time and money allows. A school library's collection is never complete.

Now our sixth-grade students study ancient civilizations throughout the year, which culminates with a state-mandated Classroom-Based Assessment in social studies. Students read and do research from multiple sources to answer an essential question about a civilization, and they must include at least three sources, including primary and secondary sources, in their bibliography.

At the request of the teachers, I support this research by teaching lessons either in the classroom or in the library, depending on schedules. I teach several lessons focusing on primary sources, and one or two about effective online searching, refreshing students' memories about a topic I introduced to them in earlier grades.

My partnership with the sixth-grade teachers developed over the years as we all grew more comfortable with the curriculum, and as I better understood how I could support students' preparation for this assessment. At first, when the curriculum and assessment were put into place, the teachers and I would engage in lengthy discussions. But now, when the teachers are ready to introduce this topic, we simply have a short conversation or exchange a quick email, since we are all comfortable with our roles in the students' learning.

It takes time for teachers to learn a new curriculum, but after a year or two, they can make it their own. Classroom teachers create projects to enhance the curriculum, and when a curriculum change occurs, they must find ways to incorporate their work or develop new projects. Teachers are flexible, but a major change involves other teachers as well, and collaboration between teachers and the teacher librarian can stall as everyone gains familiarity with the new curriculum.

For several years, our second-grade students studied insects in science, and the teachers embraced this topic and used it to teach across the curriculum, incorporating reading, writing, and technology skills. I planned lessons with them, and they encouraged me to be an integral part of the process. After a few years of working together to create materials and plan the unit, we became comfortable enough to meet only a few times before and during the unit, and then after to assess student projects. The teaching happened in the classroom, the library, and the computer lab. The students asked questions, researched a chosen insect, and then created a presentation. They had multiple teachers throughout the process, and we all worked together toward the same goal.

For my part, I gathered materials online and in books and encyclopedias, limiting the choices of insects so students could focus on the research process and not have to spend hours trying to find information about an obscure insect. I helped students craft their questions, and worked with the classroom teachers to help students understand nonfiction text features, so they could find information easily using the index, captions, and table of contents. I supported the students' work in the computer lab next door to the library, and made myself available along with their teachers to help them create a slideshow presentation, including an interactive quiz they shared with each other.

Such collaborations with classroom teachers can happen in a variety of ways. Sometimes I approach classroom teachers after I become aware of a particular aspect of their curriculum or an impending project. I then suggest ways I can support them and their students with materials or teaching, or both. And sometimes teachers approach me with ideas or questions. The interaction depends upon the personality of the teacher and his or her willingness to ask for support. I also need to be seen as

someone who is willing to collaborate in classrooms, and I need to be visible around the building as a reminder that I am available and willing to work with teachers.

The recent emphasis on working in professional learning communities has created a positive culture in my school and district, and I am pleasantly surprised that new teachers frequently ask me to work with them and provide resources and ideas. The culture of a building and a district can encourage collaboration, and in the past, I have sometimes had difficulties in getting teachers to work with me. But recently, a deliberate focus on collaboration in our district has fostered the idea that the students in our school belong to all of the staff, not just their classroom teachers, and that we are all responsible for their learning. Teachers are encouraged to think beyond the walls of their classrooms and seek outside opinions and ideas, including those of specialists, such as teacher librarians. This push to work together has resulted in greater communication among teachers and has encouraged everyone to talk about our teaching and our students.

Making Time and Connections

For all teachers, having enough time—a prerequisite of collaboration—is a constant struggle. Some districts have built collaboration time into their schedules through an early release afternoon once a week or a late start once a month. But this time, however, is often scheduled for building, grade-level, or department meetings. In some districts, the teacher librarian and specialists in physical education, art, and music teach classes so that classroom teachers at the same grade level can meet during common planning time to collaborate on lesson plans and improve their instruction.

While these are very important opportunities for teacher collaboration, how does a specialist find time to meet with a classroom teacher? In my case, collaborations with teachers are almost never scheduled. Most of my planning happens in short bursts: five- to 10-minute chats in a classroom or hallway while students are at recess. Collegial planning time set aside by my district does not facilitate all the communication necessary for collaboration, as every staff member needs more time than is available. Teachers must meet with other teachers in the same grade level, as well as with those who teach in other grade levels and those who teach like subjects. There is no time for a classroom teacher to have a weekly or monthly scheduled meeting with the teacher librarian, or the art teacher, or the music teacher. Sometimes I can ask for a few minutes in a grade-level meeting, but agendas are so full of reviewing student data and assessments and aligning curricula, among other topics, that they hardly fit into an hour, so I try not to impose on that time.

The idea of having an hourlong meeting where a teacher and I plan a unit down to the last detail is not realistic. Emails can take the place of several conversations. When a teacher sends me the student instructions for a project, I can look through them for important information to support the teacher and students. Stopping to visit a classroom at the end of the day, or sending my schedule to a teacher so she can find a common free time when I can teach in her classroom, takes just a few minutes and is less intrusive to a busy classroom teacher. In my experience, keeping it simple leads to greater success.

For instance, when a fifth-grade teacher stopped by my desk and mentioned that her students would be studying the 13 colonies and then giving presentations, she left me a copy of the handout the students were going to receive explaining the project. She asked me to consider what kind of support I could give her and the students, and then left to return to her classroom. Our meeting was not a formal one; it lasted less than three minutes. But it gave me enough time to think through my response, and we continued the conversation later, both in person and via email. I emailed her relevant websites, scheduled a time to teach a lesson in her room about effective online searching, and gathered materials on the colonies that her students could use in their classroom for a few weeks. This level of involvement did not require a long meeting or discussion.

* * *

To connect with classroom teachers, I make an effort to get outside of the library and stop by classrooms. If I expect teachers to want to connect with me, I need to work to connect with them as well. Often this is how I find out about projects or ideas that I can support. I might stop by a class that is starting to examine rocks and minerals from science kits, and a student's question sparks the idea that these

students need a set of books in their classroom for a few weeks so they can expand their reading and research beyond what is in the science unit.

Just as important as working closely with classroom teachers is working closely with students. I listen to their questions and book recommendations, and survey them to find out their interests and backgrounds. I use this information to engage all students in what is happening in the library. I want to not only provide them with books, but also help them understand that the library and what we learn here will help them throughout their school careers. Every time I don't have a book a child requests, every time I fail to show a child how to find the answer to a question, I lose an opportunity to make a connection between the student and the library. I work my hardest with students who continually turn down my book suggestions in hopes that someday they will take a book, read it, enjoy it, and realize that the library might actually contain something they would like to read. When that happens, it's a victory not just for me, but for libraries—and teacher librarians—everywhere.

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Endnote

1. American Library Association, "The State of America's Libraries, 2013," special issue, American Libraries, 2013, 28.

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