

FEATURE

Susan Altman

susan@susanaltman.org



Truly Getting to Know the Students

Benefits of Being a Library Assistant while Studying for an MLIS Degree



Introduction

On the stage before me was a ram-bunctious third-grader, pounding away on a set of drums. Shortly after, a beloved second-grade teacher took the stage with a few of his students in tow, and they started dancing in sync. During both of these events, the rest of the crowd—the entire student body, as well as faculty and staff, of Forest Heights Elementary School in Columbia, South Carolina—were going wild. The room rang with laughter, applause, and encore requests. But despite the joyousness surrounding me, I had to wipe away several tears. This was the school's talent show, one of the concluding events of the entire school year. Suddenly, it hit me that, like the fifth-graders soon moving on to their various middle schools, I was going on to my next stage too.

Two years prior, I had been hired as the school's library assistant, despite the guarantee that I would not be staying long term. The school librarian at Forest Heights, Linda Lundeen, and the principal were aware of my ambitions from the start. I was already taking classes in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) Program at the nearby University of South Carolina, intent on becoming a school librarian myself.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work as an assistant at Forest Heights, and because of my positive experiences I hope that all school librarians reach out to pre-service school librarians from nearby universities. If you have an opening for a library assistant, consider an MLIS student for the job, even if doing so means you have to go through the hiring process again sooner than you might prefer. If you can't afford an assistant—a luxury, I know, in this budget-strapped world—consider offering ongoing volunteer opportunities for pre-service school

librarians. You will serve as a mentor to those entering the profession. You may also find they have knowledge and alternate perspectives to offer your school library program.

I consider my time as the library assistant at Forest Heights to have been an apprenticeship. While my MLIS required that I take two internships, these are short-term affairs. Being immersed in a school for two years provided me with a lot of practical knowledge that I will take with me when I become a school librarian elsewhere. Below are just a few of my personal takeaways, along with a few notes about how a school librarian can benefit from having a pre-service school librarian on staff.

Overall Elementary Experience

When I enrolled in the librarian preparation program at the University of South Carolina, I had middle or high school librarianship in mind, as I had recent experience working with those grade levels by judging historical papers and websites on National History Day. (Unlike many school library certification candidates, I had no experience as a classroom teacher.) Prior to working at Forest Heights, the last time I had entered an elementary school had probably been during my little sister's sixth-grade year over a decade ago, when I was still in secondary school myself. I am



not yet a parent, and I never babysat. I was a little nervous about my ability to interact effectively with elementary school students.

As it turns out, catching on didn't take long. At the time, the school library was on a mostly fixed schedule, which has since changed to fit best library practices. At the time, though, I benefitted from the fixed schedule because I was able to see the majority of the students at least once a week. Due to this constant exposure I quickly was able to intuitively recognize the developmental differences among students in various grades. I was also able to pick up on aspects of elementary school that had changed since I had been a student.

The phrase "criss-cross applesauce" entered my vocabulary; while the seated position had been one my own elementary school teachers had requested frequently, they referred to it by another name. Other more significant aspects of elementary school life that had changed included the layouts of classrooms. While some teachers still wanted desks in neat rows, many used alternate set-ups, with standing desks and bean bag seating often being put into the mix.

Another benefit of seeing the students each week was that by paying close attention during checkout I was able to memorize many students' names, and I saw how this effort helped out tremendously in the

long term. Students initially were surprised I knew them by name without having to refer to the computer screen, and many warmed up to me afterwards. The simple act of calling students by name can cause them to feel as if the library is their space.

Promoting the Collection

In library school, I adored my children's and young adult literature classes. They gave me a reason to catch up on my Newbery, Caldecott, and Pura Belpré winners! Working at Forest Heights gave me a chance to promote these critically acclaimed works via readers' advisory.

Being immersed in a school for two years provided me with a lot of practical knowledge that I will take with me when I become a school librarian elsewhere.



However, I also learned a lot about students' interests, such as professional wrestling, origami, and, of course, princesses. Some of my favorite moments involved helping a clearly excited student locate a book featuring a Disney princess! When I have my own school library I will always order the national award winners each year but will also be sure to keep up with topics that interest students so that I can frame the award winners appropriately. Knowing the details about topics popular at a school definitely helps "sell" books. For example, at Forest Heights I was inundated by WWE wrestlers' names for the first time in my life, and I tried to use this new knowledge to my advantage during booktalks and one-on-one conversations. When I entered a graduate school program, the sentence "Our biography about Big Show is currently checked out, but how about this book, *Niño Wrestles the World*, by Yuyi Morales?" may not have been something I'd ever imagined saying, but it intrigued many students!

Getting Acquainted with the Faculty and Staff

Once I started to get to know the faculty and staff at Forest Heights, I wished I could somehow jump into a time machine to visit my own elementary school faculty and staff to see them from my adult perspective. I was amazed by the array of talents and interests at Forest Heights, which ranged from a talented illustrator to marathon runners. I worked with a very interesting group of people; my own elementary school teachers were probably equally fascinating!

My interactions with Forest Heights teachers helped me develop a mindset for planning collaborative endeavors when I am in charge of a school library program. As library assistant I also saw that most first-year teachers were especially receptive to overtures from the school librarian. I saw firsthand the importance of having a draw to the library; the school librarian for whom I worked kept a candy stash in her office!

Teachers could—and did—stop in for a treat, providing an opportunity for the librarian to initiate all kinds of conversations. I heard one about the idea of participating in video conferences with other classes from all over the world and another about the librarian and teacher working together to help students develop the skills they need for science fair research.

Also, I got to know the majority of the "classified" members of the school, such as the instructional assistants, the database specialist, the bookkeeper, and the building supervisor. Even one of the members of the cafeteria staff enjoyed unwinding in the school library at the end of each day. Talking to these people helped me comprehend just how much goes into the running of the school, and how a team with diverse skill sets helps ensure student success. Many staff members even aided the library program in some way, such as an instructional assistant who brought her personal items and



created a Kwanzaa display in the space in December every year. Others helped out during our special events. I will always share a kinship with classified (that is, nominally non-teaching) employees, as I have been one. I'll always want *all* members of the school staff to know that their expertise and voice are always welcome in the school library.

Outside Resources

Forest Heights Elementary is a Title I school. At times, working the register at our book fair could be depressing, as many students were not able to afford books they desired. On the flip side, I was able to see the power of literacy organizations such as Reading Is Fundamental, First Book, and Open eBook, and companies such as Epic!, all of which provided our students with an array of books, either paper or digital. My eyes were opened to the wealth of literacy-related resources available, and sometimes all it takes to use them is a little time to research them and register online.

Professional Development

The school district I worked for, Richland County School District One (aka Richland One), has oversight of library programs through its Instructional Technology Services division. The division regularly holds professional development sessions, even for library assistants. These half-day sessions spread throughout the school year provided me with useful insights into the other school library programs throughout the district. Participants were able to visit other schools to get ideas that we might be able to use in our own schools. At each host school, the school librarian, principal, and assistant principal informed us about the unique aspects of their school and library. Other library assistants, many of whom had held the position for decades, also shared their expertise during these sessions. Several library assistants had worked under a string of librarians and had had to train them in many ways!

The Instructional Technology Services division also encouraged school librarians and library assistants to join the state's school library association, the South Carolina Association of School Librarians (SCASL). This encouragement led me to participate in SCASL events sooner than I probably would have otherwise; I attended the SCASL conference, summer institutes, and other workshops whenever I could. During the smaller events, I was often one of only a few library students in attendance. Not only were the sessions informative, but all of the events were great opportunities to network and hear about the actual goings-on in school libraries across the state.

Programming

The Forest Heights school library had two major events during each of the school years that I was there. The first, Polar Express, was an annual tradition just before winter break and involved having a guest reader from the community come to the school and read a story of his or her choice to a class or two at a time. Students were given hot chocolate and a cookie. The second, Literacy Day, took place just before school let out for the summer and included a summer-reading kickoff with the public library, literacy-related activities—such as following directions to make lemonade—and other fun stuff.

The school librarian for whom I worked did the major planning and scheduling for these events. I was able to sit in on some of the planning sessions she held with members of the library advisory committee. Therefore, I was able to comprehend how much planning and work actually went into both events—valuable insight to take with me to my first job as a school librarian.

I grasped how much careful attention to the logistics of everything mattered. For example, I saw an experienced

My interactions with Forest Heights teachers helped me develop a mindset for planning collaborative endeavors when I am in charge of a school library program.



School librarians can also encourage library students to incorporate their new knowledge into the library program, as the lessons pre-service librarians are learning reflect the most up-to-date best practices in the field.

school librarian plan the Polar Express schedule that would best work for the readers and the classes, calculate how many packages of cookies were needed to last through an entire day, determine how long it would take a whole class to make lemonade on Literacy Day, and other such details. All of the planning I saw made me realize how seemingly simple events can require extensive planning and preparation when scaled up to apply to the entire student body. I also saw that, if all of the effort provides the students with fond memories, the work is worthwhile!

Technology

Richland One adopted the 1:1 technology model during my last year at Forest Heights, providing its students with Dell laptops. All of our third- through fifth-graders received one. It proved to be a transformative moment for our school library program. Not only were we able to promote our e-book collection extensively for the first time, but we were able to see and hear firsthand about how the laptops were initially being used in the classroom. The school librarian and I also had to troubleshoot them fairly often, as our IT technician was assigned to multiple schools. The troubleshooting gave me a chance to talk with the students about what they were learning in class, what they were reading, and how they were using the laptops.

How Does All of This Benefit the School Librarian?

To begin with, having a library student as an assistant ensures that both the librarian and the assistant highly value literacy and education and share goals for the school library program based on standards and proven best practices in the profession. Like the librarian, the library student wants K–12 students to become ethical and effective users of information, lifelong readers and learners, and critical thinkers. Of course, grad students in other fields

can believe in these ideals too, but a library student has already dedicated herself to the profession and can be expected to be especially motivated during her limited time at your school.

Many pre-service school librarians are already familiar with books enjoyed by young readers. Ideally, all pre-service school librarians already have some working knowledge of libraries, at least as a regular user of public and academic libraries, and know how to shelve in the correct sequence, use online catalogs, check out materials, and use reference sources.

School librarians can also encourage library students to incorporate their new knowledge into the library program, as the lessons pre-service librarians are learning reflect the most up-to-date best practices in the field. Pre-service school librarians can also be encouraged to contribute to the library program in creative ways. For example, letting them try out new ideas they have for the space and displays may make the library more appealing to kids!

Looking Ahead

My experiences in the Forest Heights Elementary School library confirmed that I made the correct career choice. One of my largest realizations came very early in my employment at the school, as I attempted to settle into a routine and discovered that no two days were ever the same in that school library—as I am sure is the case in the majority of school libraries! Although the occasional challenge arose, I learned something new all the time. I liked the atmosphere. All of my experiences as an assistant in a school library reaffirmed my decision to become a school librarian.

In the long run, any school librarian who gives a pre-service school librarian a chance for some hands-on experience will, through the protégé,

play a major, if indirect, role in the library program of another school. I constantly reflect about what I learned at Forest Heights; I'm sure other pre-service librarians would be similarly affected by their time at an elementary or secondary school. I plan to keep in touch with the school librarian I assisted; Linda Lundeen has already had a big impact on my preparation for leading a school library program—and I'm sure I'll ask her for advice down the road. I hope, too, that when I have my own school library, I can pay it forward and have a similar positive impact on another school library student!

I will always fondly remember those two far-too-short years with the faculty, staff, and, of course, the students at Forest Heights Elementary. Having the opportunity to help them reach their goals was an honor. I hope you will consider providing a library student with a

chance to get to know and become a contributing member of your school. A good way to start? The next time you have a job opening for an assistant or opportunities for volunteers, ask the closest MLIS program administrator to spread the word among the university's MLIS candidates. You'll be glad you did!



Susan Altman is an MLIS candidate at the University of South Carolina, with an anticipated graduation

date of May 2017. She is a member of the South Carolina Association of School Librarians and received the Nancy Jane Day Award in 2016. Beginning in the 2017–2018 school year, she will serve as the school librarian at Eau Claire High School in Columbia, South Carolina.