FEATURE

ADVOCATING FOR THE "WHY" OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES

Empowering Students through Inquiry

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Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

To many, advocacy for school libraries may seem like a treadmill where the only way to achieve success is by continually speaking twice as loud or running twice as fast. Advocacy seems to require repetitive activity and mindlessly following an advocacy path prescribed by experts who offer tips and techniques that have been "successful" somewhere.

School librarians can transform their advocacy efforts by stepping off the treadmill and refocusing on the why of advocacy, the impact of school libraries on learning and student empowerment, rather than on the advocacy itself. Effective advocacy in this frame has three components:

1) focus the school library on making an impact on student learning,

2) collaborate with others to create that impact, and

3) celebrate student successes with target audiences.

Focus on Making an Impact on Student Learning through Inquiry

Young people are confronted daily with too much information. Much may be either intentionally or carelessly inaccurate or biased information, or perhaps opinions that are cloaked with a false mantle of authority, or shallow or tweet-level bits that convey limited understanding, narrow viewpoints, and the absence of empathy. School librarians empower students to navigate and evaluate the complex

world of information in order to select the most reliable and relevant ideas to answer their questions and to fuel their own learning and creativity. By focusing the library on this vision of student empowerment, school librarians define the why for their libraries: the impact of the library on student learning. That impact is the essential core of powerful advocacy.

Inquiry may be the school librarian's most important tool to accomplish a vision of student empowerment and learning. By fully integrating inquiry into their libraries, school librarians can transform students into independent learners and critical thinkers. Inquiry is not simply a research process to follow when completing an assignment; it is a way of approaching the world.

Inquiry is a recursive learning process that involves thinking, challenging assumptions, seeking multiple perspectives, and building deep and personal understanding. The process of inquiry involves several phases, with essential information fluency skills at each phase. In the Stripling Model of Inquiry, the six phases of inquiry have been identified as *Connect, Wonder, Investigate, Construct, Express*, and *Reflect* (Stripling 2010; Stripling 2014).

Learners often start their inquiry by connecting with their own curiosity about topics or ideas. They might ask themselves "What do I already know about this idea? What previous experiences have I had that help me understand it? Why do I want to learn more?" Almost immediately, curious learners move beyond this early Connect phase to the Wonder phase by asking questions about what they want to learn. Learners often move back and forth from Wonder to the next phase, Investigate, where they start pursuing

answers, asking deeper questions, and seeking additional information. The Investigate phase involves the greatest number of inquiry/information fluency skills that school librarians need to teach because of the information/misinformation-rich environment that has enveloped society today.

Deep empowerment of learners through inquiry comes in the next phase, Construct, when they synthesize the information they have discovered and form their own opinions, draw conclusions, develop original ideas based on evidence, and essentially integrate new ideas into their prior knowledge. The next phase, Express, helps learners cement their new understandings by sharing their ideas with others. Authenticity in the audience and the format of the final product enable learners to make real-world connections and perhaps take action on their new ideas. Finally, the last phase of inquiry is Reflect, in which learners think about both their process and product of inquiry to decide what they might do differently the next time they research a topic and what new questions they want to ask and investigate.

Inquiry-based teaching and learning is not easy. Some of the most academically talented students struggle with inquiry because they are used to excelling at "learning" the information in a prescribed curriculum with clear right and wrong answers amidst a defined body of knowledge. When they have to decide their own path, write their own questions, evaluate the information they find, and draw their own understandings, students may flounder unless they receive simultaneous instruction in the information fluency/inquiry skills that enable them to learn on their own.

The school librarian's role is to teach the unique skills required by inquiry in a comprehensive continuum from pre-K to twelfth grade. School librarians have found that, when they teach appropriate and specific skills, the impact on learning is profound. Learning becomes personalized as students have the opportunity to define their own paths based on their interests. Learning is both engaging and challenging. Students of all abilities and grade levels thrive when they are expected to perform at a high level. Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) comes to life in students whose school librarian pushes them to reach the highest levels of their ZPD, ask tough questions, and search for answers beyond the superficial façade of easily accessible facts (1978). School librarians have discovered that when students are empowered to develop the skills to take charge of their own learning, the students develop understandings that cross over from class to class and year to year. Students are able to be metacognitive and reflective of their own learning.

Collaborate with Others to Create the Impact on Student Learning

School library lore and literature have, at times, propagated a "shaming" campaign against those librarians who do not put primary emphasis on collaboration, suggesting that school librarians cannot be successful without close collaboration with classroom teachers. That is not a realistic picture of many librarians' situations when they are providing planning time for classroom teachers, teaching thirty classes a week, split between two or more schools, or contending with a hostile or apathetic administration or teaching staff. In addition, this vision of collaborative librarianship implies that the end goal is collaboration itself. Just as the end goal of advocacy is not advocacy itself, so the reason for collaboration is not actually the act of collaboration, but rather instruction closely aligned and synergistic with classroom learning.

The challenge, then, is for school librarians to identify those essential skills that enable students to develop new understandings about their classroom content and their own personal interests. School librarians must move from traditional collaboration (planning an instructional unit or lesson with a teacher) to a proactive role in analyzing the school curriculum (perhaps through curriculum mapping), engaging in conversations and detective work to identify current projects and assignments, using test scores and other data to assess the current status of student skill development, and mapping an information fluency curriculum that draws from library and content standards. In other words, school librarians develop an instructional plan for teaching inquiry/information fluency skills that are most appropriate for their specific school, that can be refined and developed further in conversations with teachers. In this model of collaboration, librarians are not dependent on finding time to meet with teachers to draft an instructional plan, but rather use their professional expertise to craft an approach they can bring to the collaborative conversations.

Various tools are available to help school librarians start to prioritize among all the inquiry skills they might teach to delineate the ones most important for their specific students. The AASL *National School Library Standards* provide an overall framework and a first layer of skills that are critical for all students

to develop (2018). In New York state, a PK–12 information fluency continuum, called the *Empire State Information Fluency Continuum* (*ESIFC*), takes the AASL Standards to a more comprehensive and grade-by-grade level to enable librarians to translate the standards into specific skills and develop skill-based lessons (Stripling et al. 2019). The re-imagined *ESIFC* has just been published online to provide an extensive curriculum of skills, identify priority skills for each grade level, and offer adaptable graphic organizers to assess student learning for each priority skill. This continuum may be viewed and downloaded on the NYS School Library System Association website (<https://slsa-nys.libguides.com/ifc>).

Many of the skills in the *ESIFC* are predictable and probably already included in school librarians' inquiry instruction. Other *ESIFC* skills push instruction in new directions to respond to the changing information environment and increase attention on the social and emotional development of students along with their academic development.

Librarians may expand their definition of information fluency and strengthen their teaching impact by developing instruction for the following nontraditional skills: identifying assumptions and faulty prior knowledge; developing questions at several levels of thought; asking questions for which there are multiple answers; digital, visual, and media literacy; lateral reading; corroboration; consideration of multiple perspectives; social and emotional dispositions; drawing conclusions; forming opinions; making claims; design thinking; thinking metacognitively; netiquette; respecting cultural differences; ethical online behavior; developing self-identity and agency; and using social media responsibly.

Once school librarians gather evidence and develop an instructional plan with a continuum of skills appropriate for their school, those collaborative conversations can begin. A series of questions and suggestions will help elicit information librarians need to be able to match aspects of their instructional plan with the instructional units being considered by the teacher:

- *What content do you want your students to learn as a result of this unit?*

- *What are you considering as the students' final product or shall we design it together?*

- *Given your expectations, I think your students would benefit most if I taught them to…when they are finding information and… when they are solidifying their ideas to create their final product.*

- *Are there other skills on this priority skill instructional plan that you would like me to teach or for us to co-teach?*

- *I will assess your students' success in developing the new skills and share the results with you. We will be able to decide if students need more instruction or more practice to be comfortable using the skills during inquiry.*

- *We should also be able to gauge how well their use of inquiry skills impacted the quality of their final products.*

The essential aspect of this collaboration for schools focused on making an impact on student learning through inquiry is that the selection and teaching of the skills must be fully aligned with classroom content. Even if school librarians cannot meet directly with all the teachers, they can use their curriculum maps and knowledge of what students are studying to devise a

THE LIBRARIAN ADVOCATE MUST BUILD ON THE EVIDENCE OF STUDENT EMPOWERMENT BY USING TRANSPARENT, ACTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH TARGET AUDIENCES—ADMINISTRATORS, CLASSROOM EDUCATORS, PARENTS, AND THE BROADER SCHOOL COMMUNITY.

plan that matches their priority skills with the specific curriculum content. Creating a whole-school impact on student development of inquiry skills and content understanding requires careful and strategic planning by school librarians, close collaboration between librarians and classroom teachers to teach or co-teach the most relevant skills for the content, shared responsibility for assessment of skill development as well as content learning, and a willingness to engage in authentic conversations in which librarians and classroom teachers share their goals, expectations, frustrations, and knowledge.

Celebrate Student Successes with Target Audiences

Once the school-wide plan for enhancing student learning through inquiry has been implemented and fully integrated into the academic life of the school, the third component of advocacy through the impact of inquiry must be tackled. Essentially, this phase involves recognizing and celebrating student successes in learning with multiple constituencies, both within the school and in the larger school community. The first, and most important, target audience is the students themselves.

Students must be invited to recognize and utilize their own increasing agency. Through inquiry, they have become "experts." As such, they have developed both self-confidence and motivation to share their new understandings with diverse audiences beyond their classroom teacher. Some learners have probably even been empowered to take social action emanating from their inquiry research; the school library is an ideal forum for students to launch campaigns to improve aspects in the school or wider community. Librarians enable students to celebrate their own successes by integrating reflection and metacognition into inquiry experiences, providing opportunities for students to share their work publicly.

The librarian advocate must build on the evidence of student empowerment by using transparent, active communication with target audiences—administrators, classroom educators, parents, and the broader school community. The message is clear: school libraries impact student learning through the development of inquiry skills. Crafting the message for resonance with various audiences takes careful consideration, because different

audiences will interpret the evidence according to their own priorities, understanding of inquiry, and use of language.

Of primary importance is that advocacy messages need to be about the impact of the school library on student learning, not about things the school library has done. Messages must be celebratory, with specific examples of excellence including teacher praise for students' hard work. Excerpts of student work can be featured, assuring both credit and privacy as appropriate.

Attention must be paid to the priorities of audiences, offering specific evidence for how the impact of the inquiry-based approach fulfills those priorities. Administrators, for example, may be most concerned with students' literacy scores. Offering specific examples of successful development of higher-level literacy skills would enable administrators to regard the school library as an integral and positive component of the administrators' own performance. Parents may be most concerned that their children develop the skills to complete research assignments successfully and participate responsibly and safely

in online environments. School librarians deliver effective advocacy when they share aspects of their curriculum with parents as well as tips and tools that help parents take an active role at home. Many members of the community have little knowledge of what students are learning in school, but they recognize the imperative that today's students are prepared to be future contributing citizens. Messaging to the community outside of school about the inquiry skills that students are learning and the projects they are completing is advocacy that generates broad support for the role of the school library.

School librarians must also consider communication strategies available for delivering these messages, from simple bookmarks to complex websites; the format of the communication must match the intended audience. Consider accessibility; for both school communities with limited access to high-speed Internet connections or high populations of non-English speakers, an English-only, complex newsletter may not be accessible for many parents. Although school librarians themselves may love to participate actively on Twitter, many teachers, administrators, and parents do not have time or interest in following a Twitter stream. Pictures communicate valuable documentation of successful library experiences; however, innovative photography or graphics should be used because faces of children should not be regularly posted to any online platform.

Through social media platforms, school librarians are able to extend advocacy beyond the school walls. This wide net enables librarians to celebrate the impact on student learning with a community-wide audience. Reaching decision makers like school boards, central office administrators, city officials, and legislators with advocacy messaging about the impact of the library's focus on inquiry and student learning can result in powerful support for the school library in terms of finances, scheduling, public affirmation, and staffing levels. Building parent understanding and support reinforces the impact and extends the culture of inquiry into the home. Sharing successes publicly also results in enhanced personal networks for school librarians, as professional colleagues react and reshare the ideas globally.

Advocating for the "Why" of School Libraries

The simple story of a little second-grade boy in the Bronx illustrates very powerfully why school libraries make a difference in the lives of learners. "Antonne" was a good reader and an avid school library user. When the newly renovated library in his elementary school held a grand opening, Antonne was invited to the ceremony. While waiting for the festivities to begin, the library supervisor sitting next to him smiled and said, "Hello." Immediately, Antonne responded with, "Ask me anything about American presidents." The supervisor was momentarily taken aback, so Antonne continued, "I have read every book in this library about U.S. presidents. You can ask me anything. I'm an expert!"

Yes, if all our second graders and fifth graders and twelfth graders regard themselves as experts because they have conducted inquiry in the library, then all school librarians have to do to become powerful advocates is to tell that story. The impact on student lives and learning will sell itself.

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