Supporting ARTICLE

A Complicated Legacy Defines School Librarians as Teachers

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A Complicated Legacy

How does the legacy of school librarianship inform the future of school librarians as teachers? We have engaged in a long and productive struggle to transform teaching and learning. Our history is complicated; our profession embodies several internal contradictions.

My Experience

My reading identity was formed in my school library. As a proto-obsessive fourth-grader, I frequently engaged my librarian, Mrs. Dugger, in my search for the next great read about horses. To her frustration, she failed to expand my genre repertoire; however, our conversations about stories made me a reader. Later, as a school librarian, my focus on reading receded as I embraced information literacy and the idea that kids learn best when the information search is connected to the curriculum. As a library supervisor, I championed the use of a district-wide inquiry process model to teach information literacy. My missionary zeal irritated many people, school librarians included.

Was my library the "heart of the school" (Certain 1918)? No, but it was integrated into the intellectual life of the classrooms. Did I achieve high levels of collaboration? Rarely. Although the school welcomed the library's support of classroom instruction through parallel efforts, it was never the "right time" for my principal to require teachers to co-plan, co-teach, and co-evaluate with me. Did my students become "effective users of ideas and information" (AASL 1988, 1)? I'll never know. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that some of my students used information strategies they learned from me later when they were in middle school, but no statistically relevant measure of my impact on their learning exists. Did all of my district's school librarians embrace the district's Inquiry Process Model? Sadly, no. Many of them reported that their schools had other priorities.

My experience illustrates several of the internal contradictions in our profession.

- My state, unlike half of the United States, requires libraries and state-certified school librarians in every school.
- School library goals related to information literacy and collaboration are rarely supported by school-level policy, governance, and structures.
- My love for reading got me into this business, but in most official school library channels information literacy and other educational innovations trump "reading for pleasure."

As we look to our future, I believe we need to acknowledge and address these and other internal tensions. Wayne A. Wiegand has placed many factors of our complex legacy in their historical context in *American Public School Librarianship: A History* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2021). This article will address two of them: the power structures that govern our work in schools, and our concepts about books and information literacy.

Who Gets to Be a School Librarian?

Power structures determine who can be a school librarian, how school libraries are supported by legislation and funding, and the extent to which a librarian can achieve their goals.

We have had a long struggle for professional identity in both education and library worlds. The first set of school library standards was developed under the aegis of the National Education Association, not the American Library Association (Wiegand 2021, 61–64). Until AASL was established as a division in ALA, advocacy and leadership for school libraries bounced back

and forth between ALA and the larger—and more powerful—NEA, and efforts to co-develop standards extended to 1969 (Wiegand 2021). While there is a national consensus that the entry-level credential for public and academic librarians is an ALA-accredited master's degree in library science, many paths to school librarianship are determined by state law and educational licensing requirements. A school library credential may be an ALA-accredited master's degree, a Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation-accredited master's degree in education with a school library concentration, teaching experience plus a library endorsement earned through a variable number of accredited or non-accredited courses, local or state-level certificate programs, or a competency test (Kimmel et al. 2019; Kachel and Lance 2021a). Without guidance from the United States Department of Education (USDOE), these disparities are likely to continue (Yates 2022). In comparing course requirements of ALA-accredited MLIS degrees and CAEP-accredited library licensure programs, Judi Moreillon, Sue Kimmel, and Karen Gavigan found that readings and assignments in MLIS degree programs tend to favor the information specialist role of the school librarian and those in the education programs tend to favor the teacher role of the school librarian (2014).

It is no wonder that school library practice varies so much, or that some MLIS-degreed librarians regard some of their fellow school librarians as less well prepared for the profession.

Legislation and School Libraries

For a century we have been engaged in the struggle to achieve AASL's current vision that "every school librarian is a leader; every learner has a school librarian" (AASL 2022). We need federal legislation in place for this vision to become a reality. Up until now, local and regional policies have determined what school libraries can be and whether there are librarians in them.

The federal government establishes national educational policy and promotes policy through funding and guidance issued through the USDOE. Presently, there is no representation for school librarians at the USDOE and no guidance as to staffing and services in school libraries. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defined a school library as:

> An organized collection of printed and/or audiovisual and/or computer resources which is administered as a unit, is located in a designated place or places, and makes resources and services available to students, teachers, and administrators. A library media center may be called a school library, media center, information center, instructional materials center, learning resource center, or any other similar name. (IES, NCES 2019, 19)

Note that this definition does not reference a school librarian or any other person in charge. By contrast, R. David Lankes has contended that "a room full of books is simply a closet, but. . .an empty room with a librarian in it is a library" (2011, 32). And yet many "school libraries" in the U.S. are without librarians.

Debra E. Kachel and Keith Curry Lance have used NCES data to show the disparities in librarian staffing throughout the country. They noted that ten states and the District of Columbia mandate school librarians and enforce the mandates, while another fourteen states mandate but do not enforce school library staffing standards. Kachel and Lance further concluded that library staffing is not correlated with funding. In schools that lost librarians in the last decade, the numbers of other school employees either stayed about the same, as with teachers, or increased, as with administrators and curriculum coordinators (2021b).

Wiegand noted that the most significant legislation for school libraries was Lyndon B. Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed in 1965 as part of his War on Poverty (2021, 151–52). Title II funding in this legislation provided $900,000,000 for the purchase of library materials between 1966 and 1976, but there was little funding for school librarians (Wiegand 2021, 153). As I write this article on October 6, 2022, ALA and AASL announced that Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ-03) introduced the bicameral Right to Read Act (S. 5064

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and H.R. 9056). If passed, this would be the first national funding since the 1960s designated specifically for school libraries.

Achieving Our Goals

Collaboration

We have tried to make library learning essential by connecting it with the curriculum. According to the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries,* "collaboration is integral to school librarians' work as educators. . . [and] practicing coteaching positively affect[s] learners learning" (AASL 2018, 148). A checklist of success indicators includes:

- The school librarian participates in the implementation of collaboratively planned learning experiences by providing group and individual instruction, assessing student progress, and evaluating activities.
- The school library provides an environment in which collaboration, innovation, and creative problem solving thrive. (AASL 2018, 176)

It is easy to plan lessons and even units that support classroom learning; this action is fully within the individual's control. Yet our standards challenge us to co-plan, co-teach, and co-evaluate with classroom teachers. Success in this level of collaboration is often beyond the practitioner's immediate control. More often, systemic change is required to change the classroom-centric nature of schools. The power structures in place in a given school may determine that the librarian's primary responsibility is to provide release time so classroom teachers can have unencumbered planning time. The kind of collaborative practice described in our literature requires full participation and buy-in from other educators, starting with the principal, who is already balancing many competing demands on teachers' time. School librarians have little chance of success at collaboration without extraordinary interpersonal and political gifts and a lot of very hard work.

What's Our Purpose?

According to the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, "all libraries are forums for information and ideas" (ALA 2019). Books are central to users' experiences in libraries (Wiegand 2021, 8). As containers for ideas, books have power beyond their physical, tactile, and sensory characteristics to engender human connection and cement themselves in our collective consciousness as symbols. I believe that in a word-association game, most folks will say "books" or "story-time" in response to the prompt "library."

Where do we stand with regard to books and reading in school libraries? In the struggle for relevance to educators, could we have compromised our association with story and the power of reading?

Wiegand has posited that early libraries collected "useful knowledge" to build capacity for production in the emerging industrial age. Then, school librarians prioritized "useful knowledge" connected to the curriculum and "quality literature" selected from vetted lists (Wiegand 2021, 39–40). As 1960s-era futurists predicted computer-enabled paperless information ecosystems, "useful knowledge" became "information" (Wiegand 2021, 217–18). Finally, "information literacy" became a central focus for school libraries (Wiegand 2021, 7). This is reflected in the AASL Standards, which since the 1980s have continued to refine and expand information and other kinds of literacy as a primary focus of school libraries.

AASL continues to reference reading in its standards. For example, look at the common beliefs in the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. The statements "Reading is the core of personal and academic competency" and "Intellectual Freedom is every learner's right" speak to the librarian's role in "elevating" the learner's literary experience and promoting their choice and agency as a reader (AASL 2018, 13). Does this adequately describe why our users read? Does it adequately describe why each of us reads?

Look, y'all: The struggle is real. Like AASL, I have staked my professional reputation on teaching information literacy through an inquiry process. Yet, there is nothing about that effort that engages the imagination like putting books in kids' hands. Don't you go all shimmery inside when you see a repurposed school bus bookmobile? Books, because they represent the power of story to connect humans across time and place, are our future. Mrs. Dugger, my librarian, knew this.

Multiple Expressions/Multiple Voices

As I have been writing and thinking about this article, I became convinced that our way forward is to honor multiple expressions of school librarianship. Why not just acknowledge that different states will choose different paths? Why not celebrate divergent forms of school library practice? Why not define what appropriate library work looks like for paraprofessionals, or for librarians who split time between buildings? If fully certified, great! And why can't Librarian A center his library practice on books and reading, and Librarian B center her

practice on information literacy, and Librarian C center their practice on tinkering, making, and other forms of play, while Librarian D develops a completely online library experience? I believe the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* support any of these paths to provide multiple opportunities for learners to develop their own reading and learning identities.

In today's political climate, I'm not optimistic about U.S. public education. I'm worried about teacher shortages, attacks on teachers and librarians, political gamesmanship that diverts funding from public schools, and, of course, the unprecedented number of book challenges. This is a time of crisis. But we've had crises before. Giving in to the status quo may be premature.

Influence the Power Structure

The Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 had a significant impact in the U.S. Sputnik spurred twenty years of the greatest federal investment in K–12 education in the last century through the National Defense Education Act (1958) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). The former supplemented funding for existing school libraries to make U.S. students more competitive in the sciences (Wiegand 2021, 127). ESEA was intended to provide equitable opportunity to all learners. Title II of ESEA poured millions of dollars into school library collections in every state so kids of all income levels would have access to new books. If you've ever weeded a book that was stamped "Title II Funding," you've touched history.

We may be in another such a moment. The Covid-19 pandemic laid bare the inequities of access to broadband Internet and other opportunities to access education across our country.

The introduction of the Right to Read Act is a response to the crisis of our day. If passed, the Right to Read Act will support hiring and training of state-certified school librarians, authorize funding up to $600 million for school library materials, reaffirm the First Amendment rights of readers of all ages, and provide liability protection for teachers and librarians who provide access to reading materials (ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office 2022).

This is our opening to influence the power structure that could enable a school library in every school. Use your voice and engage the voices of your teacher partners to support this bill. We are not alone; the NEA is an ally.

Frame your support for this bill as a demand for equity for our students; American children deserve better than they are getting right now. Our future as a democracy requires equitable access to books and ideas. Appeal to hearts and minds by making this legislation about the transformative power of reading.

The NEA's legislative agenda for 2022–2023 lists full funding for school librarians and school libraries as priorities (NEA 2022, 4, 9, 30). Frame your support for this bill as a demand for equity for our students; American children deserve better than they are getting right now. Our future as a democracy requires equitable access to books and ideas. Appeal to hearts and minds by making this legislation about the transformative power of reading.

To influence your principal and teacher colleagues, take steps to be a leader. Talk about your students' learning and reading success. Figure out how to track student progress. Negotiate to prioritize time and make space in the library for learner-centered inquiry and exploration. Center the story you tell on learners: How are they developing their reading identity? What insights do they have into the curriculum concept? Who helped someone solve a problem?

Make Literacy Central

Our job moving into the future is to make our libraries places where learners can engage with stories, develop their reading identities, and fall in love with learning. Whether you choose books and reading, information literacy, tinkering and gaming, or a virtual library as your focus, I believe we will continue to grow and prosper as a profession if we ground our work in the power of story.

Mary Keeling, MSLS, *EdS, is an adjunct instructor in Old Dominion University's Library and Information Studies Program. Mary has worked in school, academic, and museum libraries, and in 2021 retired as Supervisor of Library Media Services in Newport News, Virginia. She is a past president of the American Association of School Librarians and of the Virginia Association of School Librarians, and chaired AASL's Standards and Guidelines Implementation Task Force, which developed a plan for launching AASL's* National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries *in 2017. She has written and taught courses for AASL's online learning platform, served on state and national committees, and written for school library journals. She is currently serving as AASL's representative to ALA's Committee on Professional Ethics. Mary has been married to a very patient man for forty years and has two adult children. In her spare time, she sews, lifts weights, and binge-reads mysteries, police procedurals, and some historical fiction. She got her start as a binge-reader in the fourth grade, when she read every horse book in the school library and then announced there was nothing left to read. She claims her nine years doing readers' advisory in an elementary school was well-deserved karma.*

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