The Evolving Roles of School Librarians during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

K–12 instructional settings diversified worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic response. Research is needed in examining school librarians' evolving roles during this era. Beginning in the 2021–2022 school year, K–12 remote-synchronous learning was an instructional option in a progressive U.S. public school district. This new "school" within the district was established without funding allocated for a certified school librarian. The overarching research question of this study was "What did it mean to be a school librarian during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore, analyze and describe the school librarians' experience of changes in their professional roles during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews of six school librarians were used to generate rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon. Three major themes emerged: the local context of the school librarians' roles during the pandemic, the pandemic as an antagonist to the school librarians' former and present roles, and the experience of tensions within the evolution of the school librarians' roles. The results suggested that the pandemic's contributions to students' learning loss present an ongoing, critical need for school librarians' core value of positively impacting student achievement. Implications for school librarians are that they are strongly positioned to thrive during further evolutions of their roles as instructional settings continue to diversify.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the diversification of K–12 school instruction, including remote-synchronous teaching (Atelsek, 2021; Azorin, 2020; Bishop, 2021; Shah, 2021). Beginning with the start of the 2021–2022 school year, a new instructional setting of full-day remote learning was made available to all 43,000 K–12 public school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) in a U.S. public school district of 49 traditional schools, each with a certified school librarian. In the spring of 2021, district planning began for this new, permanent remote learning option that would be chosen that fall by one in seven of the district's students (or by their parents or guardians). A substantial realignment of resources touching all aspects of school district operations was implemented that impacted personnel, budgets, and curriculum. Several terms emerged to describe this study's different instructional settings. To clarify those settings, this research study report refers to the following categories:

Apex Academy [pseudonym] – the remote online learning program affiliated with Apex School District (ASD) [pseudonym] since 2011 for grades 6–12; a program modeled as an independent school.

Apex Blended [pseudonym] – the software-supported learning option offered since 2011 to grades 6–12; with a local certified teacher in support, students enrolled in courses full-time (at-home setting) or part-time not to exceed one course per term (students attended their brick-and-mortar buildings for a traditional face-to-face schedule).

Apex Virtual [pseudonym] – the new remote learning video-conferencing option that was offered beginning in the 2021–2022 school year to all ASD K–12 students; with no instructional software component, students received full day, synchronous instruction in all subjects from locally certified teachers working from home and following a virtual bell schedule.

For the purposes of this study only, the COVID-19 pandemic is framed as the period between March 2020, when the emergency switch to remote learning was made by ASD, and March 2022, when data collection for this study ended.

Apex Virtual became a permanent response to the societal changes that emerged during the pandemic for remote work and study, and remains in operation with relevant implications today. With the launch of Apex Virtual to mirror an independently operating remote school with its own graduation coach and instructional coach, among other full-service positions, it held the highest enrollment of all district schools or programs upon launch in the fall of 2021.

Data gathered in research in school librarianship consistently shows positive relationships between school library programs and gains in student achievement, yet newly created positions in school districts have been funded nationally at the expense of school library positions (Lance & Kachel, 2018). ASD followed this trend. Although in the district previously established relationships between the traditional school librarians and the Apex Blended students' on-site facilitators had benefitted learners—with the school librarians sometimes serving as the on-site facilitator themselves—school librarians and library services were not included in Apex Virtual's

design. In addition, no attempt was made to prepare existing school librarians to adapt to new ways of schooling during or after the pandemic.

Student achievement data of Apex Virtual learners was ascribed back to the brick-and-mortar schools. Therefore, the traditional school librarians were just as accountable for the literacy data of Apex Virtual students as they were for the students in their own buildings who were navigating the trials of the pandemic. Further, Apex Virtual students and faculty still needed equitable access to library services, raising interesting questions as the traditional school librarians were also experiencing the impacts of enrollment losses to the new program. A review of the research (see the literature review) indicates a lack of phenomenological studies of school librarians.

Significance of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore, analyze and describe the school librarians' experience of changes in their professional roles during the pandemic, including phenomena such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and/or role strain. This study is of significance to district-level policymakers who design organizational structures and make personnel decisions, as well as district-level instructional technology and information services departments who co-lead technology integration with school librarians. Also benefitting from this study are principals who strongly inform school librarians' roles (Church, 2010), and school librarians themselves, who must be able to define their roles within workplace experiences to lead effectively.

The overarching research question for this phenomenological study was: "What did it mean to be a school librarian during the COVID-19 pandemic?"
The sub-questions for this study were:

Q1: As instructional settings diversify within a 1:1 school district, how, if at all, do K-12 school librarians experience their roles evolving and/or proliferating?

Q2: As instructional settings diversify within a 1:1 school district, how, if at all, have school librarians experienced role conflict and/or role strain?

Q3: How, if at all, do school librarians respond to multi-role work environments to ensure continued success in their professional role(s)?

Conceptual Framework

Phenomenological research approaches the research topic without predetermined assumptions. This may also mean moving away from traditional theoretical frameworks (Larsen & Adu, 2021). This study's conceptual framework bridged role theory (Biddle, 1979) and disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997) to examine the participants' experiences within a transcendental (see Methodology) phenomenological approach. The study considered the possibility that Apex Virtual may have represented, in its inaugural year, a disruptive innovation within the context of public education, which may further evolve the K–12 school librarian's professional roles. Shank and Bell (2011) have built a bridge between the theories of disruptive innovation and librarians'

roles, proposing that the emerging field of blended librarianship is librarian-centric, not library-centric: "The very forces that are changing the processes of learning and education are also changing librarianship. They are drawing it closer to and literally entwining it with those processes. The educational role is thus a primary goal..." (p. 106).

Literature Review

This review of research is organized around school librarians' professional roles prevalent in the literature, recognizing that themes may overlap within the roles presented in this review. For example, suppose a school librarian is an effective information specialist. In that case, the person likely exhibits technology leadership attributes both as a self-identifier and by peer recognition. The themes surrounding professional roles are co-dependent and thus guide the study's theoretical frameworks of role theory and disruptive innovation.

Instructional Partner

Literature of recent years on the instructional partnership role of a school librarian includes perception studies of principals (Lupton, 2016; Church, 2010), a phenomenological study of school librarians (Reed & Tharp, 2020), and the emergence of the embedded librarianship model in instruction (Hoffman et al., 2017). Lupton's (2016) qualitative study identified role conflict and role strain when examining principals' perceptions of the school librarian's role in Queensland, Australia. Lupton cited discrepancies in school librarians' job titles, qualifications, and duties. Those findings aligned with Church's (2010) results that individual principals' perceptions and localized needs strongly inform school librarians' roles as enacted. Lupton noted that "it was the person who made the role valuable, not the role per se" (2016, p. 55).

Reed and Tharp (2020) conducted a phenomenological study of eight school librarians in the southeastern U.S. who elected to take on extra-role behaviors in their work. They reported a lack of perception by classroom teachers that school librarians were their equals in classroom experience, perceptions that could negatively affect productive collaboration between the school librarian and classroom teachers as instructional partners.

Hoffman et al. (2017) conducted a case study that explored an emerging model of collaborative librarianship known as *embedded librarianship*. The concept of embedded librarianship appeared as an emerging role in the years preceding the pandemic when blended and online learning environments proliferated. Boyer defined embedded librarianship as "the practice of school librarians integrating their expertise into content area classes" (2015, p. 72), with examples such as providing information literacy modules and tutorials (Boyer & Kelly, 2014, p. 366). Hoffman et al. (2017) found that the time demands of embedded librarianship practices posed a significant barrier to implementation.

Local Expectations

The literature on the dynamics between school librarians' circumstances and their enactment of professional roles includes empirical studies by Elkins (2018), Johnston (2012, 2015), and Lewis (2019). Elkins (2018) conducted a qualitative study to examine where gaps existed between school librarians' job descriptions in Florida compared to the 2009 professional standards published by AASL and noted that "the differences...may be a source of role ambiguity, conflict...for school librarians" (Elkins, 2018, p. 87). Johnston (2012, 2015) conducted a study of barriers and enablers to school librarians' actions as technology leaders in schools. In Johnston's 2012 study, school librarians identified a supportive principal as the greatest enabler to enacting a technology leadership role. In contrast, a frequently cited barrier to leadership enactment by school librarians was a competitive relationship with the school's instructional technology specialist (Johnston, 2012, 2015; Wine, 2016). Perceived role ambiguity as experienced by school librarians with their principals and district leadership was also identified as a barrier to their role (Johnston, 2012). Lewis's (2019) case study of California school administrators supported the findings of Lupton (2016) and Church (2010). Lewis noted that the importance of the professional relationship between the principal and school librarian most closely impacted instructional leadership decisions.

Information Literacy Specialist

Literature covering the role of the school librarian as an information literacy specialist includes studies by Fontichiaro and Johnston (2020), Cherinet (2018), Phillips and Anderson (2020), Farmer (2019), Reed and Oslund (2018), Merga (2019), Crary (2019), Adekoya and Adedimeji (2021), and Phillips and Lee (2019).

Several of these researchers identified varying perspectives on what information literacy and related skill sets are. Fontichiaro and Johnston observed that "Media literacy, news literacy, and information literacy have overlapping definitions, and the synergies far outweigh the distinctions" (2020, p. 76). Cherinet advanced multiple skills required for school librarian roles under the umbrella term of *transliteracy* (2018, p. 95) to include information literacy, digital literacy, and communications competencies. Information literacy "has long been one of the major roles of school librarians" (Phillips & Anderson, 2020, p. 385). However, technology has exponentially increased accepted definitions—and resulting critique—of what constitutes news. This is an example of how new competencies inform the literature and learners' needs for skills to assess validity of sources in a changing information landscape (Farmer, 2019).

Reed and Oslund's 2018 mixed-methods study examined school librarians' perceptions and preparation to teach students higher level literacy strategies as stated in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) of 2015. Findings revealed that school librarians indicated a lack of confidence in fulfilling this role and that targeted professional development would be beneficial (Reed & Oslund, 2018).

Merga's (2019) qualitative study of 30 school librarians in Australia identified a significant school librarian's role in promoting and supporting not only information literacy but literacy (reading). Citing Australia's high-stakes literacy testing of students that occurs at intervals throughout primary and secondary school, Merga's findings identified school librarians' literacy roles of providing test preparation support and the sharing of literacy data with teachers to strengthen instruction.

Crary (2019) employed a mixed-methods methodology in her study of information literacy instruction, including classroom teachers alongside school librarians in her data collection. Classroom teachers were more open to collaboration with school librarians when they initiated the collaboration (87.2%), as opposed to when school librarians initiated the collaboration (84.9%), and more open to collaborate to teach information skills themselves (83.7%) versus having school librarians teach the skills (74.4%). Crary's findings maintain that classroom teachers are more comfortable with school librarians in a supporting role, but not necessarily a collaborative, co-teaching role, which may be an area of concern to school librarians as roles continue to evolve.

The literature also acknowledges the measurable influence of librarians' instruction of information literacy from the approach of disruptive innovation in an empirical study by Adekoya and Adedimeji (2021). In a mixed-methods study of digital citizenship instruction, Phillips and Lee noted that "school librarians' roles and responsibilities are diverse and dependent on the schools in which they are working" (2019, p. 3), consistent with the results of our study that are presented in the findings.

New Teaching Practices and Emerging Roles

Empirical studies presenting new pedagogical practices (Bishop, 2021) and/or emerging roles for librarians have been presented by Cherinet (2018), Soulen and Wine (2018), Hughes-Hassell and Stivers (2015), Cooke (2019), Beck (2015), and Santos Green, Jones, and Burke (2017).

Bishop proposed a new K–12 instructional paradigm, *pandemic pedagogy* (2021, p. 4), emphasizing the building of personal relationships, adapting instruction, and student-directed learning. Similarly, Cherinet (2018) conducted a perception study of 60 academic librarians and over 50 university students, revealing future needs for teaching and learning innovation skills, cultural intelligence, diversity skills, and negotiation skills.

Soulen and Wine's (2018) case study results indicated that K–12 school librarians could build teachers' capacity for resilience by promoting perseverance, displaying empathy, and providing critical support to new teachers in the first days of school. Their case study also supports the results from Cherinet (2018) in identifying behavioral "soft skills" as critical to shaping expected school librarian roles of the future. Soulen and Wine (2018) also support the findings of Bishop that emphasized relationship-building and adapting to the personal needs of students as pandemic pedagogy (2021, p. 4) is navigated, as it was in the setting of this study.

An earlier study by Hughes-Hassell and Stivers (2015) proposed an integration of culturally relevant pedagogical practices into school librarians' professional practices. The results support the studies by Bishop (2021), and Soulen and Wine (2018), recognizing that, for school librarians to fully realize their emerging roles and remain relevant, the building of personal relationships must be inherent to school library practices at all levels.

Cooke (2019) utilized autoethnography to tell her story as an academic librarian. Parallels are recognizable between Cooke's development of a humanizing pedagogy for library and information science and the pandemic pedagogy proposed by Bishop (2021). Through Cooke's journey, she encouraged others to tell their stories. "Librarians need to be new storytellers" (2019, p. 120).

Studies by Beck (2015) and Santos Green, Jones, and Burke (2017) examined the role of school librarians in fully online schools, the predecessor to the new instructional setting of K–12 remote-synchronous learning studied in this research. Each addressed ambiguity, with Beck having noted that "the role and responsibilities of the school librarian...continues to be undefined in this [cyber and virtual school] setting" (2015, p. 79), and Santos Green et al. (2017) having noted that the delivery of library services in online K–12 environments was unrealized at the time of her study.

Revealed Need for Additional Research

The reviewed research indicates the complexity of the role of a school librarian. However, the studies primarily focused on one role or aspect of a school librarian position, such as educational partner, information literacy specialist, technology leader, or reading specialist. There is a need for research that can identify ways to reduce the stress of the evolution of the roles, the risks, and the vulnerability of school librarians' positions, especially in post-pandemic times and with the development of new instructional settings. Studies are needed that examine workplace role experiences and emotional responses, studies such as this one, through the underutilized methodology of phenomenology. School librarians' experiences are personal, and their stories are worthy of investigation through phenomenological research.

Methodology

The methodology of this research study that examined the experiences of school librarians in evolving roles within diverse instructional settings was phenomenology. While both the hermeneutic and psychological approaches to phenomenology are prominent in qualitative research, American psychologist Clark Moustakas (1923–2012) emphasized the psychological approach chosen for this study (relying on participants' rich description of the essence of their experience) based upon Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) concept of *epoché*, also known as *bracketing* (Moustakas, 1994). While Moustakas's interpretation of the phenomenological study has shortcomings, the bracketing technique was applied to this study due to the lack of sound research protocols in phenomenology as applied to librarianship. Our concern was not the phenomenon (the changing role of the school librarian) but the participants' experience of changes in their professional role during the pandemic. From a transcendental phenomenological

perspective (Husserl, 2012), our role was to review, understand, and describe the thinking acts and the cognition presented to us by participants during the interviews. By doing so, we should be able to get to the meaning of their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data analysis involved practicing epoché and phenomenological reduction, using a description-focused coding strategy to generate themes and codes. Justification for this study was supported by a lack of research examining the lived experiences of K–12 school librarians, particularly during the phenomenon of the pandemic years as an accelerant of change. Methodologies supporting these types of studies in school librarianship are the underutilized methods of phenomenology and autoethnography, which would significantly add to the discourse on school librarians' role experiences.

The overall population of this study included 49 full-time, certified K–12 school librarians employed by ASD. A sample population was sought that represented the range of instructional levels to enrich the context of the descriptive interviews. Selection of the participants was purposive, non-random, and consisted of stakeholder sampling (Palys, 2008). Priority for selection was made for school librarians who have been awarded district recognition as School Librarian of the Year, followed by those who had presented at a state or national conference within the previous three years. Contingent upon the level of interest, the final inclusion criteria gave priority to those within each school level who had the most years of experience. School librarians who consented to participate had been employed within the district for a minimum of three previous school years.

The participants of this study included three middle school and three high school librarians from the same southeastern U.S. public school district. The diversity of the participants manifested in educational attainment, years of experience, and patron service levels (see Appendix A). The participants were highly engaging storytellers and expressed themselves compellingly through extended narrative responses. Evelyn, Carley, and Ally [pseudonyms] comprised the high school group, and Gena, Joanne and Daisy [pseudonyms] comprised the middle school group. Carley and Gena were each selected as ASD's School Librarian of the Year within the three years prior to data collection in the spring of 2022, and Evelyn and Gena both hold doctorate degrees in education. (All the others have credentials beyond their bachelor's degree.) Carley, Ally, and Joanne were previously classroom teachers of visual arts, Spanish, and social studies, respectively, and Gena and Daisy both had experience outside of education in public and private sector communications. Gena had previously worked in the press office of an unnamed state political figure, and Daisy had worked in the radio industry.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection procedures aligned with phenomenological inquiry. Two 45-minute semi-structured, qualitative interviews consisting of open-ended lines of inquiry were conducted individually with the six school librarians, and transcripts were created for analysis. Follow-up interviews with each school librarian were conducted two weeks after initial interviews. Both interview protocols (see Appendix B) were conducted in March 2022 and audio recorded.

The line of questioning for the initial interview began with demographic questions, followed by a "grand tour" question to elicit participants' thoughts about their students, learners' needs, and

how those needs impact the participants' work. This grand tour question was followed by questions specific to service models, roles , and technology leadership experiences.

The line of questioning for the follow-up interview began by asking whether the participants were part of their school's leadership team. The remainder of the questions in the second interview elicited the school librarians' thoughts on equity of library services, evolving roles, implementation of district initiatives, role strain issues, and the future of school librarianship. Finally, each participant had the opportunity to conclude the interview with any further thoughts she wanted to share about school librarians' evolving roles in diverse educational settings.

Data analysis for this study was guided by the bracketing device (Moustakas, 1994) using the Dedoose cloud-based application. Source data files of the qualitative, semi-structured interviews were imported into Dedoose from Otter.ai audio files as a new project. Upon import, segments of data, or quotations, were selected for analysis as "significant statements" (Creswell, 2007, pp. 60, 61), a process that Moustakas (1994) calls *horizonalization*. Following horizonalization, coding commenced as Kay Elizabeth Wright developed "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61), establishing themes. Following phenomenological data analysis, connections were drawn between themes to provide "textural description" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) of the participants' experiences and "structural description" (p. 60) of the participants' experiences in terms of conditions and/or context of the experiences. Then the descriptions were combined to convey the essence of the experience. Finally, reports were created. Wright determined items to be included in each report, including code groups, comments, quotations, and memos.

Coding is an appropriate method for qualitative data analysis such as for this study because it is "the main categorizing strategy in qualitative research" (Maxwell, 2009, p. 236). Maxwell (2009) states that "the goal of coding is...to rearrange [the data] into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and between categories…Such categorizing makes it much easier for you to develop a general understanding of what is going on, to generate themes and theoretical concepts, and to organize and retrieve your data to test and support these general ideas" (p. 237). Saldana (2009) provides specific insight into coding which is beneficial to me as a researcher: "most qualitative research studies in education will generate 80-100 codes that will be organized into 15-20 categories which eventually synthesize into five to seven major concepts" (Saldana, 2009, p. 20).

Reports were interpreted to draw conclusions surrounding the overarching research question. Meaning-making was applied to the analysis of the interview transcripts. The findings of the data analysis were compiled and presented. The goal of constructivist research is to understand phenomena. Through a qualitative examination of rich data, the phenomenon of the evolving roles of school librarians in diverse instructional settings was explored.

Findings

Three major themes—and numerous sub-themes—emerged from interpretation of the data:

- the local context of the school librarians' roles during the pandemic,
- the pandemic as an antagonist to the school librarians' roles at the start of the pandemic and roles as they evolved during the pandemic, and
- the experience of tensions within evolution of the school librarians' roles (see Appendix C).

These themes provided context for interpretation of responses in the context of the overarching research question.

Local Context

Collectively, the six participants described their pandemic-era school librarian roles through a breadth of occurrences. Through their storytelling, the pandemic emerged as a collective antagonist. A frame naturally fell into place to then consider the group of school librarians as the protagonists. The trajectory of the protagonists' responses tilted toward concern with the pandemic's effects on their students more than its effect on themselves. Apex Virtual was not viewed as a threat to their roles. Rather, the pandemic was identified as exacerbating students' academic and social losses for which school librarians would be needed to fulfill the profession's critical role of positively impacting student learning. All participants expressed resilience and confidence, however, that they would continue to have (after the data collection period ended) an intervention-type role in their schools in confronting and overcoming these challenges. The six participants had varying roles and contexts during the pandemic.

Middle school librarian Gena, an Ed.D. employed in an upper-socioeconomic middle school of 1,277 students, described a performance of duties most closely aligned to widely recognized societal roles of school librarianship. Having described herself as the school's sounding board, she provided examples of instructional partnerships with teachers, technology integration, and innovative community outreach during the pandemic such as bookmobiles. Gena considered herself the instructional technology specialist of her school.

Carley was a high school librarian of 1572 students, with a background as both a high school visual arts teacher and a middle school librarian. Like Gena, Carley perceives herself as a technology leader, with her defining characteristic being intuition instead of budget: "knowing what to present, how to present it, and when…you're almost able to provide [teachers] what they need even really maybe before they realize that they need it" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). Carley believes that technology has served to level the playing field in education and is a function of equity. She used her background as an art teacher to expand traditional norms of school librarianship. Describing herself as the school's "bartender" in the psychological sense, her library prominently featured a "Decompress Zone," with coloring sheets, coloring books, and an assortment of markers, crayons, colored pencils, and other art materials.

Evelyn and Ally were high school librarians of 1525 and 1731 students, respectively. Evelyn, an Ed.D. like Gena, was employed at the highest-performing high school in the district. While she lamented about a significant pandemic-era transition to substitute teaching, she provided positive examples of pivoting services at the pandemic's onset. Evelyn set up a Google Classroom to offer virtual library services and provide pertinent communications for 200 of Apex Academy's blended students that were zoned to her homeschool. She also initiated a curbside book checkout (a novelty in March, 2020) that circulated almost 100 books to her high school students in a few weeks.

Ally was a high school librarian and varsity tennis coach who used a sports vernacular to describe her role(s) during the pandemic: "I'm a utility [player]…your job is whatever your principal wants you to do" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Ally also emphasized the importance of forming good partnerships; she provided an example that at the beginning of the pandemic, she served as a calm voice to an anxious co-worker about hybrid teaching: "this is how you do breakout rooms…[with me] they felt like they had a teammate" (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

To say that middle school librarians Joanne and Daisy's words could have been spoken by any of the others, or vice versa, should not diminish anyone's dedication, individuality, or expression of the many hats they each wear. Joanne utilizes relationship building, like the others but in her own way, to head off student behavior issues: "I get a lot of contact with people, whether with technology, printing, or projects, so it gives me a leg up when there's behavioral issues. I rarely have many, because I am the lady that helps you" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Joanne accepted her role as an interventionist, or alternate location for students experiencing behavior issues elsewhere: "I get [sent] a lot of people like the ones that need their timeouts. But they just can't be in classrooms right now. I'm a safer space…you're literally mental, social and physical support" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Like Ally at the high school level, Joanne served as a testing coordinator at her middle school, one of many hats she embraced. Of the group, Joanne was the most animated and perhaps most optimistic. Our interviews ran the longest in a complimentary way. Joanne was very comfortable in her role(s) and very well versed, contextualizing each point.

Middle school librarian Daisy described the school librarian's role as dependent upon the school, a familiar sentiment: "I think my mission has to change every couple of years. My job is to meet the needs of my school. And if that's in a different way in a couple years, then that's okay" (personal interview, March 18, 2022). Daisy recognized the importance of relationship building with faculty and administration, like the other participants. She aimed to be a resource in both materials and persons, having informed her teachers that if they did not know where to locate something, ask her, and she would direct them to the correct person, even if outside of the school district.

Pandemic as Antagonist

Changes to the school librarians' role(s) originated from three main pressure points: students' academic learning loss, students' social/emotional behavioral learning loss, and responses of

school operations to address literacy needs. Joanne's sentiment in the spring of 2022 was that the majority of her students were fully two school years behind both socially and academically. In addition, noticeable student learning loss was mentioned by Gena, Carley, and Evelyn. Gena knew her middle school's statistics, having stated that only 39% are reading at or above grade level, a point of obvious concern. Carley stated that her high school is "frenzied" trying to make up two years of education in one year, resulting in decreased library visits as they focused on basic instruction: "The pace [the teachers] seem to be at is like breakneck speed of trying to make up a gap in learning" (personal interview, March 14, 2022).

Students' social-emotional learning loss had also profoundly affected the school librarians' roles during 2021–2022, as they reported having spent significant time focused on improving learners' behaviors and providing social guidance and support. Four of the librarians raised the issue, three at the middle school level (Daisy, Gena, and Joanne) and one at the high school level: "Obviously, the pandemic did its damage on everybody and everything" (Ally, personal interview, March 22, 2022). Ally further stated, "My library was closed during the pandemic because [administration] did not want to do contact tracing" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Joanne characterized a rebuilding year: "I am hoping to get back to library business…we're trying to recreate the sense of community that was lost" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Gena said that student interest in her library reading challenges had decreased since the pandemic: "Everyone is back at the drawing board" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). Daisy was already looking ahead: "If [emergency learning] happens again I think I would have to go talk to people and say, 'What do you want my role to be?'" (personal interview, March 25, 2022).

Tensions within Evolution of the Role

The six school librarians revealed similar tensions affecting their professional roles. Three themes emerged within these interview responses: tensions impacting their roles as effective instructional partners and information literacy specialists, tensions impacting their roles as effective technology leaders, and tensions surrounding emerging roles being unrealized because of the structure of Apex Virtual. While the structure of Apex Virtual is included in broader considerations of the first two topics, as well, responses were often rooted in either the pandemic or the nature of the school library position as a discipline.

Tensions Impacting Roles as Effective Instructional Partners and Information Literacy Specialists

Several of the school librarians (Evelyn, Ally, and Joanne) observed that the pandemic seemingly manifested in the practice of isolated classroom instruction, with collaborative partnerships more difficult to initiate with teachers. Evelyn's opinion was that teachers were territorial over their content. Ally lamented that students do not understand how much she can help them, because teachers do not expose them to the library: "It feels like survival mode, you know, and it is hard to pressure people [to collaborate]…I think that people do not know what we do…A handful will let me show their kids research databases" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Joanne feels resistance, as well, saying that "I have to show how the technology can help and push it to make it keep moving forward, because a lot of people get stuck in their ways"

(personal interview, March 17, 2022). On our follow-up interview, Ally spoke with more passion on the same subject:

> Academic inquiry should really be embedded in the instructional process…That process of gathering information, synthesizing information, discerning information, that is really where those teachers should be looking to is to us…I would imagine it should be that way. I do not think it is that way, though…And I think there is very few that actually do (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

Another tension within current service of the school librarian's role as instructional partners and as information literacy specialists was a shared feeling of loss due to perceived regression in the students' reading skill as a result of the pandemic. Gena, Joanne, and Ally each expressed this sentiment. Gena and Joanne, both middle school librarians, separately stated that their students were gravitating away from the Young Adult section and more towards the graphic novels. Gena recalled the energy levels of students at the height of popularity of series' such as *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* in the mid to late 2000s. She said that nothing of that level was capturing this generation's attention in that way, and she attributed it to students' having their phones accessible to social media all the time during the pandemic. Ally observed that at the high school level, the library had largely fallen away from students' radar.

Foot traffic is a consideration in the culture of high school librarianship, and Ally mentioned that the school district's reconstruction of the school entrances to enhance security measures had created tensions. The direct path between each high school's external entrance doors and adjacent high school libraries had been blocked, leaving each high school library's access point as accessible only from the lengthier travel point originating from the classrooms. "I am not on the way to anything [now]…there is no natural flow…[the] in and out of the library has pretty much stopped, and it's hard to have the energy to figure out how to change that" (personal interview, March 17, 2022). Carley, who also worked at the high school level, lamented that attracting new student patrons into the library was difficult. She said that if students did not visit through a mandatory English Language Arts (ELA) class, and if they did not visit on their own accord, how does one draw high school students inside? Daisy, at the middle school level, said that ELA teachers refused to bring their classes to the library because they believed students would be distracted, and they did not want to waste time.

Time management was another issue cited by the school librarians as impacting collaborative partnerships and their role(s) as information literacy specialists. Joanne noted that the middle school grade level teachers were all teaching the same content on the same schedule and that she could not be everywhere. She said that the only way she could see implementation of a role for herself as an embedded librarian is as a one-stop shop, which she says is a Catch-22. When asked about school librarians holding an instructional partnership role more deeply as an embedded librarian, Gena also cited time as a barrier. Ally made note of the 80 teachers comprising her high school faculty with which she was to collaborate, and wondered why the district did not allow extra contract days for school librarians to work (with pay), such as those for which school counselors and administrators were eligible?

Tensions Impacting Their Roles as Effective Technology Leaders

Technology leadership was another role in which tensions emerged within the group. Despite five of the six school librarians serving at their principal's request on their school's leadership team (the exception was middle school librarian Joanne), four of the six (Evelyn, Ally, Joanne, and Daisy) expressed dissatisfaction with their technology leadership role. Concerns included the move toward standardization of software resources, access to software resources, limited decision-making ability of school librarians and limited training offered on the district-selected resources. Evelyn stated that technology leadership opportunities are currently limited in this county for school librarians, with district guidance and support lacking. Ally felt as though the district was moving toward standardization of resources, and she felt as though the district had imposed too many limitations on what one can and cannot use. Ally stated:

> I was the tech girl at my last school…it is almost like we are not allowed to be that anymore…you know, we have people for that…we are supposed to use things that they are paying lots of money for. We are not supposed to be creative. If we can use something one day, the next day it is blocked. It has made me feel like well, I guess I need to take a step back (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

Daisy shared Ally's concerns, suggesting that the district-selected resources were not necessarily user-friendly. Daisy would like to see the district specify what is for in-person learning and what is for virtual settings. She said that the current messaging was actually that schools are supposed to be reigning back digital use: "They are pushing print textbooks again. There are a lot of inconsistencies" (personal interview, March 25, 2022). Daisy also spoke about technology leadership in terms of budget decisions: "If something gets broken, or if something needs to be purchased, or we want to brainstorm something involving technology, I feel like I'm very much out of a leadership role" (personal interview, March 18, 2022).

Joanne said that she sometimes felt disconnected with the software that was being enforced, such as for online textbooks, and she would like the Technology Office to provide training, or at a minimum, troubleshooting tips to better assist teachers. Ally also felt disconnected with the teachers' experience with the district software such as for online textbooks. She said she received questions about it from teachers, but without training, she felt disconnected. "When a teacher can't access something, I'm the first person they're emailing. And there's usually nothing I can do (it's instructional technology). And I hate to have to tell them that I can't assist" (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

Ally also felt that she was not growing as a technology leader because innovative professional development of the past was no longer presented to the school librarians' group. She wondered why the school librarians did not have a dedicated district office representative with a background in library media (school librarians were under the umbrella of instructional technology and shared the same supervisor from the field of instructional technology):

> I would much rather be teaching kids how to build a website from scratch, or something like that, but it does not feel allowed. So, you know, as a human…you can only get

disappointed and burned so many times before you're like okay, okay (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

Tensions Surrounding Emerging Roles Being Unrealized Because of the Structure of Apex Virtual

A third source of tension identified by the group was the inaugural structure of Apex Virtual, for which the 49 school librarians of ASD did not have a defined role. Gena was quite knowledgeable of Apex Academy's core instructional model but confused on the vision of a potential librarian's role, if any: "Apex Academy has a physical library, but there's no one working in it. So I don't understand how that works" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). Gena was the only participant who had experienced a collaboration with an Apex Academy faculty member, if only minimal: "They don't have a librarian. So sometimes people will email each other…I've had a friend that works over there email me and ask for help" (personal interview, March 21, 2022).

Carley rhetorically asked herself in the initial interview why she had not reached out to an Apex Academy teacher, implying confusion as she considered her role for the first time as it related to this new instructional setting: "Well, why haven't I done that?...why haven't I reached out?" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). During our follow-up interview two weeks later, Carley revealed that prior to our first interview, she had never really thought about Apex Academy students or faculty as needing library services. The question had weighed on Carley's mind in the interim, however, because she said that she had reflected on how she can reach out specifically to Apex Academy faculty members to assist. Considering students, Carley said that Apex Academy students could work through Nearpod's Common Sense media platform (a district-provided resource for teaching digital citizenship and new media literacy competencies).

Gena expressed the same line of thought. Regarding the teaching of new media literacies such as netiquette, online safety, digital citizenship, and navigating digital culture within the realm of a school librarian's information literacy specialist role, Gena stated:

> Those [Apex Virtual] kids are online all the time. So they even have more of a need for [information literacy]. It would be great if they have someone that was trained in that, to do that. But in the meantime, I don't know. Is anyone doing that? (personal interview, March 21, 2022).

Ally's position was slightly defensive, as if she was internalizing the burden upon herself for Apex Virtual's exclusion from having a school librarian. Ally stated that if Apex Virtual said they needed a digital citizenship lesson, for example, she would be happy to pre-record something:

> If [Apex Virtual] needed something, you know, all they have to do is ask…It's not on my radar unless you're asking, because there's one million things that I have to do here and that's not at the top of my mind" (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

Like Ally, Evelyn seemingly placed burden upon herself to rectify the situation temporarily on a collaborative level, rather than permanently on a structural level. Evelyn lamented that somebody had to take the first step to reach out to Apex Academy, but she was uncertain as to whether it should be the school librarian, or someone else.

Unlike Ally and Evelyn who were leading from personal initiative, Joanne's responses were quite nuanced towards a needed solution at the structural or administrative level. She presented several scenarios that would impede any of the school librarian's roles of instructional partner, technology leader, or information literacy specialist without a dedicated school librarian position for Apex Virtual faculty and students. Joanne recognized a problem if an Apex Virtual teacher, for example, assigned one of their remote-synchronous American literature classes a research project:

> The problem for Apex there, you know, the kids [are zoned] to homeschool, but not every kid is in the same homeschool. So you could easily have it where you are having four or five different librarians trying to teach the exact same group of kids. I'm teaching John, they're teaching Mary, they're teaching Sylvia and so on and so forth. And you kind of get muddled in your message…I'd be worried about that (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

Joanne also noted that with Apex Virtual's current structure, Apex Virtual teachers would not know how to follow protocol to partner with a school librarian because they are hired to work for Apex Virtual only, while their students carry an affiliation to a zoned homeschool. Apex Virtual faculty do not have any such affiliation. Similar to Ally's comment about the importance of foot traffic to a school library program, Joanne considered that she could not draw patrons in the virtual environment by dropping into their settings. Joanne also lamented that teachers were impossible to reach by email when they were in the same building as the librarian is working, so she cannot imagine trying to collaborate with an Apex Virtual teacher who would be even farther away. Joanne's responses represented a program evaluation of sorts, and her approach was that of a bird's eye view objectively examining logistics instead of providing an expedient, one-dimensional antidote. Joanne had the mind of an administrator.

Data Interpretations to Answer the Overarching Research Question and Sub-Questions

What did it mean to be a school librarian during the COVID-19 pandemic? The school librarians revealed that the pandemic refocused their schools' attention on students' whole well-being needs, and as professionals they were following suit. Carley said that her current emphasis was on building relationships with her students: "meet them on their playing field" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). The school librarians were collectively seeking how to prioritize the human side of their roles, with Gena wondering how one could build a community culture in the virtual environment, for example. Daisy recalled that during deployment of the emergency hybrid learning model of 2020, she struggled to build relationships with her students. Daisy expressed concern that Apex Virtual students did not participate in the social-emotional learning curriculum that face-to-face students receive. Ally approached her pandemic-era reflection from

the standpoint of equity: "I just don't think life can be lived from the chest up" (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

The school librarians continued to view their roles evolving more into digital spaces but were more concerned about literacy than the medium in which it occurs: "I hope we will have more of a return to reading" (Gena, personal interview, March 28, 2022). Carley suggested adapting either the physical or virtual space to whatever would generate interest and meet the current needs of the community. Evelyn predicted of school librarians' future: "60% will be digital work, working with online students, and then 40% will be the ones actually [here face-to-face]" (personal interview, March 30, 2022). Carley proposed that through a combination of print and digital resources, school libraries will evolve into the mold of public libraries, with the role of school librarians' moving more toward assisting students in pursuit of their personal interests. Ally expanded upon a point others had made regarding standardization of technology tools within the school district, expressing strong concern for standardization of the school librarian's actual role: "From what I see happening, I feel like this district is looking to standardize everything…at some point, what we have on our shelves is going to be told to us" (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

The subject of Apex Virtual drew a range of emotions and responses from the group. Evelyn did not foresee the addition of a dedicated Apex Virtual librarian position in the future, but stated the need: "I have had that question. Those parents have asked for books" (personal interview, March 9, 2022). Joanne proposed that Apex Virtual could have a dedicated virtual space for their school with a virtual librarian that manages digital collections. Joanne perceived the future of Apex Virtual and library services through the lens of her public library experience: "You will only get the ones who ask for you…only a select few who realize their resources and they get directed toward you" (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

The six school librarians described role strain issues that they attributed to ongoing effects of the pandemic. The most consistent response received was about school librarians' pandemic-induced role of substitute teaching. Most participants experienced role conflict from the assigned substitute role. Evelyn stated in the first interview: "I'm more monitoring classes, I would say, so my role has drastically changed over the past two years" (personal interview, March 9, 2022). Joanne concurred, stating: "From the pandemic, I became a permanent substitute. Literally, I was running four Google Meets at a time…" (personal interview, March 17, 2022).

Joanne also described a situational role conflict that she experienced between administration of standardized assessments and substitute teaching, with competing administrators giving her conflicting directives. Like Joanne, Ally was heavily involved in the standardized testing process. Carley also listed recent examples of extra duties she had been asked to perform leading to a feeling of role strain; these included lunch duty, bus duty, distributing treats to faculty and staff, and collecting student field trip forms.

Another area of role conflict experienced by the school librarians was between themselves and ASD's instructional technology specialists. Previously mentioned was Ally's concerns regarding the standardization of resources, as well as inaccessibility with resources often being blocked or no longer approved. Daisy shared Ally's concerns, stating that the district's instructional

technology specialists are revamping approved technology tools, and that school librarians—and other educators—will discover an approved tool is sometimes blocked. Daisy's opinion was that this sort of recurring discrepancy was the perfect type of issue for a school librarian to effectively sort out.

Joanne oversaw the distribution of all textbooks and companion software to faculty at her middle school. A concerning issue for her as she received follow-up questions was that she lacked needed training provided only to the district's instructional technology specialists. Gena performed an administrative role regarding technology budgeting and decision-making for her school, but she embraced the role, so it was not a source of conflict. Daisy's experience was different. She felt very much out of a leadership role regarding technology budget decisions, but that the school level of decision-making should be hers, providing an internal source of role conflict.

The school librarians reported role conflict with staff members in other certified positions, as well. Carley said that she previously instructed most of the professional development provided to her teachers in the building, but now this role was mostly performed by a new position that was added: the instructional coach. Daisy expressed a similar sentiment: "They'll contract people to come in and do things, and you kind of think to yourself, why didn't they just get one of us to do it?" (personal interview, March 25, 2022).

Joanne felt as though the classroom teachers should be sharing more responsibility for teaching digital citizenship with the school librarian (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

Thinking ahead to potential standardization of the school librarian's roles, Ally predicted a shared resource library to which all the district's school librarians contribute, whereas videos would be specialized for different age levels with school librarians focusing on their specialty areas, that is, selecting the best of the best.

Carley's expressed strategy for managing her multi-role responsibilities was to pick one or two innovative ideas to focus on for her teachers for the school year.

Regarding Apex Virtual, Gena proposed that a school librarian could serve in a *de facto* co-teacher role for an Apex Virtual classroom teacher, such as by posing critical thinking questions to the class group as an embedded librarianship role.

Joanne and Gena similarly recognized the capacity for school librarians to carve new roles in the virtual environment by teaching executive function skills to Apex Virtual students. Gena and Carley both raised the issue of equity of library services in considering the Apex Virtual structure: "Why wouldn't [those students and faculty] have the same resources as the other schools?" (Gena, personal interview, March 14, 2022). Carley's thoughts were that the success of the Apex Virtual remote-synchronous K–12 setting will force school librarians to strive for equity in the new instructional setting, ensuring that 24/7 digital access to resources is available and comparable.

Summary of Research Findings

In making meaning from the study's results, the collective sense leaned towards standardization of the school librarian's roles within a centralized instructional technology department structure. The librarians in the study continued to hope for beneficial supports to be implemented, such as a shared online resource catalog, a shared e-book selection available district-wide, and centralized decision-making. An air of inevitability is ever-present towards concepts such as a shared online resource catalog, a shared e-book collection available district-wide, and centralized decision-making. The school librarians expressed this sentiment as the fundamental essence of their lived experience in multiple ways. First, they provided examples of standardization efforts already underway, such as with allowed technology tools and centralized district resources. Second, they provided examples of limited technology leadership capabilities within their schools, requiring deference in critical decision-making to the instructional technology department. Third, they expressed skepticism that a dedicated online school librarian will be hired for Apex Virtual, and they expressed uncertainty as to whether their roles would bounce back to pre-pandemic traditional expectations or if they were on a new trajectory towards utility-person status, filling in as and where needed.

The group did not view the implementation of the Apex Virtual remote-synchronous model without a dedicated school librarian as a "five-alarm fire." None questioned if the setting was simultaneously underway elsewhere in the country with or without a school librarian, and, because we employed the methodological technique of bracketing, the participants were not led towards a path of inquiry in a broader setting. They talked about Apex Virtual in terms of student equity, faculty equity, funding, and likely standardization of resources, but the concern was not overt over the loss of that position.

Weighing heaviest on the school librarians' minds was observable student learning loss. In this context, the school librarians were processing what their role would soon be, and they anticipated fulfilling a critical role in their schools in implementing a back-to-basics literacy program. The critical needs they experienced in real time held more urgency than Apex Virtual opening without a certified school librarian. For this reason, as they were experiencing their roles, their demeanor was grit and determination with an attitude of at-the-ready role fulfillment for whatever work is necessary to get their students back on track.

Discussion of Results

Results from this study's data were related to the research studies in the areas of the school librarian as an instructional partner, technology leader, information literacy specialist, and innovator, with participants defining their own emerging roles within school librarianship. Understanding that many features of the above roles overlap, the instructional partnership role, the most traditional and recognized of school librarian roles, receded the most during the pandemic years as defined in this study. Church (2010) found that 44% of principals supported school librarians' access to student assessment data. One participant in this study provided a data talking point in her responses, lamenting that only 39% of students at her middle school were

currently reading at or above grade level. With this exception, none of the participants described a role in which they were interpreting and adjusting practice based on instructional data.

Results of Lupton's (2016) and Golden's (2020) studies that the school librarian made the role situationally valuable, not the role itself, was aligned to the results from all six school librarians such as stated by Gena: "Legends in our community…taught me to be a resource…a book isn't a resource to you. And if you can't make yourself a resource, then you're not going to be needed" (personal interview, March 14, 2022). These findings supported the theme that emerged of the impact of local context of the school librarians' roles. Biddle defined role theory as "a science concerned with the study of behaviors that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors" (1979, p. 4). Through rich description of the many roles that each librarian served, each provided data indicating agreement with Lupton (2016) that the context of one's role was highly situational and dependent upon the principal-librarian dynamic.

As early as 2012 Antrim and Robins noted that school librarians were serving in nontraditional roles such as testing and data entry, and these findings were supported by results from this study that revealed the numerous ways that school librarians described their roles. Due to the pandemic and resulting need for librarians to serve as substitute teachers, none of the school librarians described roles involving instructional interventions gleaned from the literature, such as Response to Intervention (RtI), as cited by Antrim and Robins (2012).

The group was in consensus that the concept of embedded librarianship, a fully integrated teacher-librarian partnership role, was not feasible at scale as they were still navigating the effects of the pandemic. While receptive to the idea, lack of time was cited as the most significant barrier to this partnership. One participant even suggested that in fulfillment of current roles, she wondered why school librarians are not required to work additional days on the lengthened school calendar of administrators and school counselors. Beck's (2015) finding that school librarian roles were undefined for fully virtual schools aligned with Apex Virtual's structure at launch in the 2021–2022 school year, for which there was no defined school librarian role.

This study's findings regarding the school librarian's role experiences with technology leadership were consistent with mixed messaging, as coined by Johnston (2015). With one exception—participant Gena who reported little role conflict or role strain in her technology leadership charge—all participants reported incidents of role conflict or role strain with other staff members in other positions. One participant noted that the instructional coach led most of the professional development she used to conduct, a phenomenon noted by Lewis (2019).

Aligned with the standardization concern, four participants noted that the district's instructional technology specialists held authority in a role the school librarians sought: the review and approval process of the district's technology tools. This phenomenon was noted in the literature by Lewis (2019), Johnston (2015), and Baker, Decman, and Willis (2020). Standardization of K–12 library resources and services at the district level was not consistent with the literature examined for this study. However, the realignment may be found in related literature or empirically in practice.

The information literacy specialist role was the one that the school librarians identified as most dynamic and evolutionary to both new and familiar instructional settings. As the strains of the pandemic continued to influence the school librarians' roles in their familiar instructional settings, most of the participants reported that their information literacy specialist role was continuing with class instruction in technology tools. Through the school librarians' insistence that this role continued, their work was aligned with the importance granted this role by Cherinet (2018), Phillips and Anderson (2020), and Reed and Oslund (2018).

As the conversations continued about Apex Virtual, participants provided examples of how the information literacy specialist role could apply within the Apex Virtual structure, even if an Apex Virtual dedicated school librarian position was not implemented. Consistent with standardization, two participants proposed the idea of prerecorded modules covering research skills for Apex Virtual students, while a third participant proposed a shared video library of technology tutorials, concepts supported in the literature of embedded librarianship by Boyer and Kelly (2014). Participant Joanne agreed with Phillips and Lee (2019) and Crary (2019) that classroom teachers should be teaching information literacy alongside school librarians: "The teachers should be whipping that into a frenzy" (personal interview, March 22, 2022).

Participants described emerging roles for school librarians that they were incorporating into practice, with most of the roles evolving from the pandemic. Bishop's (2021) description of pandemic pedagogy was echoed throughout the group as they described their various substitute teaching roles. Cherinet's (2018) proposing the teaching of soft skills such as cultural intelligence and negotiation skills was paralleled by three participants who mentioned this pedagogy as a significant use of their time.

The teaching of soft skills to students was an area that the school librarians saw as an immediate need for role fulfillment, most often mentioned in tandem with students' loss of compliance with social norms and behavioral expectations due to the pandemic. Consideration of resilience as a teachable skill to new faculty within a mentoring role, as mentioned by Soulen and Wine (2018), is certainly an avenue with potential for school librarians that informs the effectiveness of teachers and influences their evaluations.

Concerning Apex Virtual, insight was sought through the school librarians' responses as to how they were experiencing the new instructional setting that could be compared against the relevant literature. Results were consistent that participants could not design a practical role for school librarians in the new instructional setting's structure, other than a fully virtual role that was inconsistent with the district's perceived move to standardization. Metko proposed that school librarians embrace role evolution or "risk irrelevance" (2018, p. 86). The school librarians expressed initial skepticism about Apex Virtual in various ways, specifically, about meeting students' social needs for face-to-face learning and accountability.

The school librarians agreed that Apex Virtual as a new service model did not maintain existing organizational relationships. Until a change was implemented to add a dedicated school librarian position for that unique setting, they believed that the faculty-school librarian partner relationship has been disrupted, the student-school librarian relationship has been disrupted, and

equity of instructional resources to both faculty and students has been disrupted, as pointed out by several of the participants.

Conclusion

As the participants were interviewed over the course of a month in March 2022, simultaneous to the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, their narratives brought to mind the frequently referenced quote from public personalities at that time: *There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen* (debated to have been spoken by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin). Through the librarians' inflections in their voices and stated appreciation for having been selected as participants for this study to share their stories, the protagonists revealed during the pandemic a self-awareness of navigating their roles through unprecedented times of disruption. Through a "survival mode" mentality (Ally, personal interview, March 17, 2022) they described a feeling of decades happening in their battle against the pandemic-as-antagonist.

Limitations

The number of participants, six, represented the low end of the spectrum of participants for phenomenological research. ASD's conditions for participant recruitment, requiring both the district Institutional Review Board and building principals to serve as intermediaries in the recruitment process, served as a significant barrier to the recruitment process by slowing momentum and lengthening this phase of the study. The portrayal of participants required extra care in how their identity was protected, even as pseudonyms were utilized, as the overall population of school librarians in ASD is minuscule compared to other school positions in ASD, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Future Research

In considering future research areas and implications on practice, the results of this study support the idea that the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 can serve as a demarcation line in K–12 research. Participants did not speak of the recent years with any continuity of experience exclusive to this study's pandemic-antagonist. Future researchers in K–12 school librarianship will need to differentiate which side of the demarcation line is referenced regarding studies on professional roles, student achievement data, and/or experience. As school librarians must consider how to evolve their role to establish relevancy within emerging settings such as the K–12 remote-synchronous learning environment, this capacity for an embedded role is present and offers a natural evolution. More research is needed about the impact of COVID-19 on school librarians, and areas for future research are prolific.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Prevailing Characteristics of the Study's Six Participants

Pseudonym (interview order)	School Librarian Experience	Current Level	Highest Degree	Other Experience
Evelyn	18 years	High School	Ed.D.	Elementary school librarian Public librarian
Carley	7 years	High School	Ed.S.	High school art teacher (12 years) ASD *School Librarian of the Year*
Gena	21 years	Middle School	Ed.D.	High school librarian ASD *School Librarian of the Year* Government service
Ally	11 years	High School	Ed.S.	High school Spanish teacher
Joanne	3 years	Middle School	Ed.S.	High school and middle school social studies teacher (12 years) Public librarian
Daisy	8 years	Middle School	M.Ed.	Private sector (radio industry)

Appendix B

School Librarian Interview Protocol #1 – Initial Interview

Demographic Questions

1. How many years of experience do you have as a school librarian? In what settings? Can you provide a narrative of your experiences?

2. Describe any experience you have had as a classroom teacher.

3. What level do you currently serve as a school librarian? (elementary, middle, or high)

4. How many of your school's students do you currently serve face-to-face (F2F)?

5. How many of your school's students do you currently serve through blended instruction?

6. How many of your school's students do you currently serve through Apex?

Grand Tour Question

7. Describe your thoughts about your students this school year, their needs, and how they are currently influencing the work you do.

Role(s) Questions

8. How has your perception of the school librarian been shaped throughout your career?

9. What are the role(s) of the school librarian in today's schools?

10. The current emphasis in my school is _____ (Church, 2010, p. 32).

11. How do you feel about this statement: "I ensure that the school library media center's mission continues to evolve as technology changes" (Luetkemeyer, 2017, p. 82).

12. Describe your role in comparison to the district's instructional technology specialists.

13. How is the COVID-19 pandemic and the launch this school year (2021–22) of Apex's permanent remote-synchronous learning option, the virtual option, further transitioning the role of the school librarian?

14. Considering the cyclical name changes of the school library profession—i.e. librarian to media specialist, teacher-librarian, and school librarian—how do you perceive the appropriateness of the profession's current title to diverse instructional settings?

15. From an instructional standpoint only, how do you feel about the virtual option of remote-synchronous learning for ASD students?

16. Now that you have served as a school librarian in a remote learning environment due to COVID-19, do you believe that successful remote learning requires students to utilize a different skill set than successful face-to-face learning, i.e. students need to learn *how* to learn remotely?

17. Describe your experiences with technology leadership.

18. Have you collaborated with an Apex Virtual (remote-synchronous) teacher? If so, how, and if not yet, how could collaboration occur?

Thank you for your time and participation.

****

School Librarian Interview Protocol #2 – Follow-Up Interview

Role(s) Questions (continued from Interview #1)

1. Are you a member of your school's Leadership Team?

2. How do you strive for equity of library services between students across chosen instructional settings?

3. How do you describe your role in support of virtual (remote-synchronous) instruction?

4. In what ways do your roles differ in your different instructional contexts? (F2F, blended, Apex).

5. The term 'embedded librarianship' is relatively new within K–12 dialogue (2015–present). When you hear this terminology, what does it mean to you?

6. Could you perceive school librarians having a role in virtual (remote-synchronous) course design? If so, in what ways?

7. How do you perceive remote-synchronous students learning new digital literacy competencies?

8. How can school librarians support virtual teachers in implementing the *Checklist for New Teachers' Virtual Classrooms Observations*? (ASD artifact provided to participants pre-interview).

9. How can school librarians support virtual teachers in implementing the *Look-Fors to Support Balanced Instruction for Instructional Technology*? (ASD artifact provided to participants pre-interview).

10. Are there any activities in which you'd like to be more involved than you are right now? If so, please tell us about the barriers that hinder your involvement (Luetkemeyer, 2017, p. 83).

11. Describe emerging school librarianship services in 5 years.

12. If 100% of the students at your school choose virtual (remote-synchronous) learning next year, how will your role(s) change?

13. Do you ever find that your various roles conflict with one another or create a strain or burden on you? Can you give an example or two?

14. As instructional settings diversify, how, if at all, have school librarians experienced role conflict and/or role strain?

<u>Closing Question</u>

15. In conclusion, is there anything else you would like to share regarding the nature of evolving roles of school librarians in diverse instructional settings?
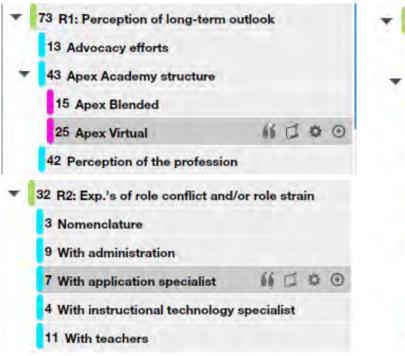
Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix C

Emergence of Themes and Analysis of Research

106 Theme: Local context of the school librarian'...

- 11 Principal's perception of role
- 92 School librarian's self-perception of the role
    - 4 Application specialist
    - 2 Bartender (psychological sense)
    - 2 Blended learning facilitator
    - 4 Building leader / resource
    - 1 Communications coordinator (website; soci...
    - 1 ESOL teacher
    - 18 Information literacy specialist
    - 19 Instructional partner
    - 24 Instructional technology specialist
    - 15 Library program manager
    - 1 One-stop-shop instruction
    - 1 Putting out fires
    - 2 Soft skills teacher
    - 9 Substitute teacher
    - 4 Teammate / relationship builder
    - 10 Technology leader
    - 3 Testing coordinator
    - 6 Utility player
    - 3 Virtual learning monitor

40 Theme: The pandemic, antagonist

- 21 Impacts to school librarian's role(s)
- 4 Need for new technology skills
- 12 Social-emotional loss
- 20 Student learning loss

79 Theme: Tensions within Evolution of the Role

- 2 Equity imbalance
- 15 Exclusion from Apex structure
- 1 Hiring for a role librarians can perform
- 5 Lack of time
- 25 Limited technology leadership capacity
- 7 Physical proximity
- 2 Social media emphasis on keeping up appear...
- 2 Standardization of the role
- 6 Student lack of interest
- 18 Teacher resistance to collaboration
- 1 Use as a utility person

Questions from the Data Collection

73 R1: Perception of long-term outlook
- 13 Advocacy efforts
- 43 Apex Academy structure
  - 15 Apex Blended
  - 25 Apex Virtual
- 42 Perception of the profession

32 R2: Exp.'s of role conflict and/or role strain
- 3 Nomenclature
- 9 With administration
- 7 With application specialist
- 4 With instructional technology specialist
- 11 With teachers

77 R3: Responses to multi-role environments
- 2 Brainstorming and innovating
- 74 Emerging roles
  - 1 Blended learning facilitator
  - 4 Building resource
  - 1 Course design
  - 4 Creating a sense of community
  - 5 Curbside book checkout / delivery
  - 11 Digital platform support
  - 14 Embedded librarianship
  - 19 New media literacy skills
  - 7 Renewed literacy emphasis
  - 2 Safe space
  - 12 Social-emotional support provider to stude...
  - 2 Teacher evaluation
  - 5 Teaching soft skills
  - 5 Virtual learning monitor
  - 9 Virtual school librarian

Cite This Article

Wright, K. E., Koz, O., & Moore, J. (2024). The Evolving Roles of School Librarians during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study. *School Library Research* 27. <www.ala.org/aasl/slr/volume27/wright-et-al >.

School Library Research (ISSN: *2165-1019*) is an official journal of the American Association of School Librarians. It is the successor to *School Library Media Quarterly Online and School Library Media Research. The purpose of* School Library Research *is to promote and publish high quality original research concerning the management, implementation, and evaluation of school libraries. The journal will also emphasize research on instructional theory, teaching methods, and critical issues relevant to school libraries. Visit the SLR website for more information.*

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