Indicators of Successful School Librarian and Teacher Collaboration: A Phenomenology

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover methods and practices that have led to successful collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers. A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was employed to discover the lived experiences of six credentialed school librarians and six classroom teachers who have successfully collaborated in the past. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that relationship building is the essence of successful collaboration, and those relationships are derived from four specific indicators: building a culture of collaboration, making the collaboration relevant to learning, starting small, and advocating. These indicators generated methods and practices that can be employed by both school librarians and classroom teachers to foster collaborative relationships.

Introduction

Preparing students for the future is a daunting task that requires the skills and expertise of many. The continual evolution of K–12 education standards and influx of new technologies, along with significant changes in the functions and duties of school librarians, have created an expanded need for classroom teachers to collaborate with school librarians. Research shows that collaboration is an essential aspect of implementing standards within the K–12 instructional program (Copeland & Jacobs, 2017). Collaboration has been defined by Montiel-Overall (2005) as "a trusting, working relationship between two or more equal participants involved in *shared thinking, shared planning, and shared creation of innovative integrated instruction*" (p. 32). Collaboration has been identified as a feature of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It is a unique process in which educators work together toward common goals in the co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessment of lessons or units of study. Collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians involves both parties bringing specialized knowledge, skills and training to deliver instruction to achieve school-wide goals (Flierl et al., 2020; Lonsdale, 2003).

Over the past two decades, numerous research studies have credited higher reading scores and improved student engagement to collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians (Copeland & Jacobs, 2017; D'agata, 2016; Kachel & Lance, 2018; Lonsdale, 2003; Scholastic, 2016). Along with increased academic achievement, collaboration benefits student research practices. Todd & Kuhlthau's (2005) research suggests that collaboration between educational partners leads to students' enhanced ability to seek, access, and integrate information in inquiry research. Collaboration can also be influential in helping students develop skills that will lead to success and flexibility in their futures (Williamson et al., 2010).

Despite the evidence linking collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers to increased test scores and elevated student engagement, successful partnerships are still challenging to cultivate and sustain on a school-wide basis (Moreillon, 2016). Research shows that barriers to successful classroom teacher and school librarian collaboration include classroom teacher perceptions; time constraints; principal/administrator attitudes and lack of support; and lack of understanding of what a school librarian is and should do to support curriculum and instruction (Crary, 2019; Francis et al., 2010; Johns & Kachel, 2017; Lewis, 2019, 2021; Merga, 2019; Moreillon, 2008; O'Neal, 2004; Wheeler & McKinney, 2015; Witte et al., 2015).

Collaboration requires training and commitment from all educational partners to benefit students. Although studies support the expansion of collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians, the data indicate that collaboration is not occurring consistently or on a school-wide basis (Eri & Pihl, 2017). Most classroom teachers and administrators lack knowledge and understanding about the education and expertise school librarians possess in teaching, curriculum development, and assessment (Eri and Pihl, 2017; Lewis, 2019, 2021; Moreillon, 2016). Classroom teachers and school librarians who have experienced collaboration prior to employment at their current school sites have an increased likelihood of collaborating with others in the future.

However, research shows that most teachers are neither prepared nor trained to collaborate with school librarians upon completion of their educator preparation programs (Latham et al., 2013; Moreillon, 2016; Witte et al., 2015). Some teachers do not view school librarians as teaching colleagues (Yevelson-Shorsher & Bronstein, 2018). School librarians consistently cite teachers' lack of willingness to collaborate and state that it is an ongoing barrier to collaboration (Lewis, 2019, 2021; Sturge, 2019).

Classroom teachers cite a lack of time as a reason for not collaborating with school librarians (Lewis, 2021; Soulen, 2021). Many believe that collaborating with another educator requires additional time and effort. Classroom teachers cite administrative duties, lesson planning, and grading as priorities during their preparation time (Crary, 2019). Teachers do not recognize that collaborating with a colleague can unburden them of some of that responsibility (Godfree & Neilson, 2018; Lewis, 2021; Sturge, 2019). Teachers who have collaborated with school librarians report that it takes less time than anticipated and reinvigorates their instruction (Crary, 2019).

Administrators' perceptions and support are critical to successful collaboration because they set the tone of the school culture and make decisions regarding the allocation of time and money to the school's instructional programs (Johns & Kachel, 2017). Research on administrator support and perceptions of school librarians indicates another barrier to collaboration. One aspect of this barrier involves the perceptions administrators have of school librarians. Much of the current research still suggests that administrators value school librarians' ability to inspire a love of reading and build a relevant collection of materials and resources for classroom teacher use rather than their ability to serve as fellow teachers, instructional designers, and collaborative partners (Lewis, 2019, 2021; Lupton, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Previous studies have described the benefits of and barriers to collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers. However, little research has been conducted with in-practice classroom teachers and school librarians to investigate the specific methods and practices that lead to successful collaboration (Eri & Pihl, 2017; Montiel-Overall, 2010). Indicators of successful partnerships between school librarians and classroom teachers must be identified to establish new norms for working together. These indicators could then be used to promote and increase collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers across the curriculum to prepare college- and career-ready students.

The purpose of this study is to discover methods and practices that have led to successful collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:
1. What are the lived experiences of classroom teachers who have successfully collaborated with school librarians?
2. What are the lived experiences of school librarians who have successfully collaborated with classroom teachers?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of teachers and librarians who have successfully collaborated within the K–12 learning environment. The goal of this approach was to discover the essence of successful collaboration.

Setting

The study was conducted through video-conferencing interviews with participants from public middle and high schools in central California. Settings were selected based upon the employment of a full-time, certified school librarian. Certified school librarians tend to be employed only at the middle and high school levels in central California.

Participants

The study participants included full-time, certified school librarians (SLs) and their collaborative classroom teaching partners (CTs). Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants, which focuses upon unique, predetermined criteria of importance (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This purposeful sampling was necessary to secure participants with shared collaboration experiences. California school websites were examined to locate middle and high schools with full-time, certified school librarians. Potential SL participants were then contacted through Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and the email distribution list for a school librarian preparation program. Twenty SLs were contacted, and six SL participants were secured for the study. Each of the 20 SLs contacted were asked if they had successfully collaborated with at least one classroom teacher in the past. Participants who responded in the affirmative and agreed to be interviewed were asked to provide names and personal email addresses for classroom teachers with whom they had collaborated in the past. Six classroom teachers agreed to participate. Finally, electronically signed consent documents were obtained from all 12 participants prior to scheduling interviews.

Table 1 reports the SL group of participant demographics. SL participant demographics consisted of one male and five females. One of the six school librarians was employed at a middle school, and the other five worked at high school campuses. Participants' years of experience as school librarians ranged from 3 to 22 years. Participants with 0 to 5 years of

experience represented 17% of the sample; 6 to 10 years of experience represented 33%; and those with 15+ years of experience represented 50% of the SL sample (see Table 1).

Table 1

School Librarian Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Yrs. In Position
Avery	Female	3
Bob	Male	10
Cathy	Female	17
Donna	Female	8
Emily	Female	15
Fran	Female	22

The CT group included six participants. The CT group of participants had each collaborated with one of the school librarians in the past. Each SL had a corresponding CT partner. Of the six classroom teacher participants, four were English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, and two were science teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2

Classroom Teacher Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Yrs. in Teaching	Subject Taught
Angie	Female	24	ELA
Ben	Male	2	Science
Connie	Female	5	ELA
Diana	Female	20	ELA
Elizabeth	Female	22	ELA
Frank	Male	20	Science

Data Collection

Approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board before engaging with data collection during June and July of 2021.

Interviews were used as the sole data collection source and conducted individual interviews with participants. The interviews were scheduled at each participant's convenience, and conducted and recorded via a video-conferencing platform.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide participants through predetermined questions but allowed for the possibility of inquiring further (Creswell, 2014). The interview protocol was generated in a deliberate manner to ensure the research process would elicit data that would identify indicators of successful collaboration. Ten interview questions were developed for each group: school librarians and classroom teachers (see appendices).

Data Analysis

Video recordings of each interview were uploaded to an online transcription service that converted the audio portion from speech to text. Participants' identities were kept confidential by assigning each a pseudonym. The coding process was begun after the interviews were completed and transcribed. Descriptive coding was applied to find commonalities between participants' experiences regarding keys to successful collaboration (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017). Data were coded by summarizing the information into words or short phrases. The words and phrases were then transferred to a spreadsheet to look for recurring categories and themes. The final step in the analysis and interpretive stages of the research process was to develop and describe the essence of how the phenomenon was experienced.

Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability were established through member checking and peer review. Member checking was accomplished by repeating participants' answers to the interview questions back to them to review data for accuracy and by sharing the interview transcriptions through email. Participants were asked to respond to the email if any of the transcribed information was incorrect. None of the participants responded.

Peer review called for work with a colleague to critically analyze the data and look for any bias or inaccuracies. A school librarian colleague was asked to check the data analysis process for validity and reliability. The colleague first reviewed the coding method to ensure that the emerging categories and themes accurately described the experiences and opinions of the participants. The colleague then examined the spreadsheet to make sure that the themes were an authentic representation of the data described by participants. Findings were shared with the participants to check data for accuracy and to verify that their experiences and viewpoints were interpreted correctly.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of their rights through a consent form outlining how their identities and responses would be kept confidential. The informed consent document also notified participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. The interview data were protected by storing the video recordings on a password-protected computer. As previously mentioned, pseudonyms were used to keep participant identities confidential.

Findings

During each interview, participants were asked to define successful collaboration as it related to education. Many of them defined successful collaboration similarly, characterizing it as a process of working with another person or persons to create a learning experience that benefits all participants.

Four major themes—indicators of successful collaboration—emerged after analyzing and coding the interview data. The four themes included creating a culture of collaboration, making collaboration relevant, starting small, and advocating for collaboration. All participants indicated that building relationships were a requisite factor in all successful collaborative efforts.

Creating a Culture of Collaboration

Participants described a culture of collaboration as important for educators to be able to work educators working together collectively for the good of the students and an exercise that can grow with time and effort.

SL Perspective

SL Bob emphasized the importance of developing a culture of collaboration by "reaching out to and building relationships with teachers." This necessitates that school librarians make themselves visible staff members by attending department meetings, listening to the needs of teachers and providing relevant support, and volunteering to lead professional development sessions. SL Fran extended this idea by stating that her key to creating successful collaborative relationships is to "keep being diligent, reaching out to teachers and being persistent."

Some SL participants stressed the importance of reading when it comes to creating a culture of collaboration. SL Cathy explained that "creating a culture of collaboration is key to getting more classroom teachers to buy in for collaboration with their school librarian and it starts with being a reading school." This culture begins with CTs promoting and modeling daily reading in the classroom.

CT Perspective

CT Ben explained that successful collaboration between teachers and librarians is dependent upon a common culture and shared learning environment. Regarding the development of relationships between the SL and CT, CT participants indicated that it requires a nuanced approach. CT Diana expressed that "relationships are important and need to be valued, but it can be a delicate balance of [librarians] not being overly pushy that can lead to teachers being more willing to let go of control of their classroom." CT Ben agreed with this assessment, explaining that "a more subtle, personal approach to relationship building is key to successful collaborative relationships."

Making Collaboration Relevant

SLs and CTs alike emphasized the significance of making collaboration relevant to the subject or skill being taught.

SL Perspective

According to SL Emily, collaboration "needs to be relevant to make life easier for the classroom teacher." She said that the stress of getting through subject material could make classroom teachers hesitant to collaborate, but making the partnership relevant can make a difference. SL Bob agreed, stating that the collaboration needs to be "tailored to the class and the lesson." SL Fran offered specific methods for achieving this: attending professional learning community (PLC) and department meetings to determine units or topics being taught, and devising ways to reinforce the learning targets or to assist with aspects of the learning such as research skills or information literacy that CTs might not feel as if they are expert at teaching. Having teacher buy-in is essential to make collaboration an integrated process through which teachers are willing to work together.

SL Avery believes the "key to successful collaboration lies in the building of relationships with the teachers on your campus." SL Donna also characterized relationships as a key component that can lead to successful collaborative relationships. She advises SLs to "learn your people and their comfort levels to build relationships" and "keep reaching out to teachers to develop things in the library to provide support for their curriculum."

CT Perspective

CT participants explained that collaboration is easier to accomplish if SLs demonstrate their willingness to find out the skills and standards being taught and to help support what is being done in the classroom. CT Ben said that it is crucial for school librarians to "meet people where they are, ask them what they will be teaching next, and ask how they can support them."

CT participants said that making connections to classroom learning can illustrate that SLs are committed to supporting them and making their job easier. CT Elizabeth suggested knowing the classroom teachers' teaching styles can help cultivate relationships and build trust. CT Diana

shared that librarians can promote collaborative relationships by "attending meetings and finding out what skills teachers are trying to instill in their students or finding out what standards they are trying to meet." Further highlighting the importance of relationships, CT Connie noted that relationships go a long way in showing that school librarians prioritize their desire to help kids learn.

Starting Small

A common theme among both school librarians and classroom teachers was the recommendation to "start small" when it comes to collaborating.

SL Perspective

SL Bob shared that beginning on a small scope "can lead to other classroom teachers seeing what can come of collaboration and how teacher librarians can be valuable resources." SL Cathy said that once they collaborated with a teacher, "others were more willing to try it, and it can create a snowball effect." This "snowball effect" is achieved when a SL collaborates with one CT, and through word-of-mouth and talking about the experience in PLC meetings, collaboration with one teacher turns into more CTs wanting to collaborate with the SL. SL Emily stated that "word of mouth" can be a powerful tool for developing collaborative relationships. She recommended collaborating with a classroom teacher who is willing, and then sending an email to staff describing the positive aspects of the experience. Sending an email with pictures, videos, and a description of the experience campus-wide can help spread excitement concerning collaboration.

CT Perspective

SL Avery said to "look to see what classroom teachers are open to collaborating first and start small." After collaborating with SL Avery, CT Angie said that building relationships and making connections can change one's perspective on collaboration. She shared that she had initially expressed hesitation before experiencing collaboration with a school librarian but that "compromise and cooperation changed [my] outlook on collaboration."

Advocating for Collaboration

Overall, participants described advocacy as informing others about the collaborative experiences taking place, showing others what collaboration looks like through emails with pictures and videos, attending meetings, and making the SL and the library visible.

SL Perspective

SL participants all stressed the importance of advocating for collaboration and reported that advocacy plays a substantial role in their position. SLs are continually encouraging CTs to view them as equals in education and to take advantage of their knowledge and skills. Participants explained that it is through advocacy that collaboration is promoted school-wide, and others are encouraged to follow. Marketing what is happening in the classroom can "open doors for others

to ask for help," SL Donna said. SL Cathy stated that marketing the SL as an instructional partner is key to developing collaborative relationships. For example, to get the word out to classroom teachers, SL Cathy set up a Google Site outlining the library services and collaborative activities that have been accomplished in the past, and she created separate pages for various library events. Similarly, SL Avery started a blog of library activities and events, and shared it throughout the campus to plant the seeds of collaboration. SL Emily sends emails to staff to share pictures, videos, and information about successful collaborative experiences. Finally, SL Donna suggested a type of "passive advocacy," such as inviting administrators into the classroom when a collaborative lesson occurs to observe firsthand how powerful and rewarding it can be for students, CTs, and SLs.

CT Perspective

Many of the CT participants said they still view SLs in traditional roles and do not instinctively view them as instructional partners. The CTs interviewed felt relationships were the key to developing collaborative partnerships. CT Angie remarked that without trusting relationships, successful collaboration is not possible. Recognizing this situation, many of the classroom teachers agreed with school librarians that advocacy plays a large role in developing successful relationships that can lead to collaboration. CT Frank admitted that librarians "have to be go-getters to get the ball rolling and gain momentum with teachers." CTs advised SLs to make themselves noticeable by attending meetings, sharing ideas, and offering support. CT Ben agreed that advocacy is critical to successful collaboration but warned that it is a delicate balance. He advised, "a more subtle and personal approach to advocacy will help to build rapport and make teachers feel comfortable and at ease working together [with SLs]."

Discussion

The results of this study aligned with the literature regarding the definition of collaboration. Montiel-Overall (2010) has defined educational collaboration as two or more people working together to improve learning through co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing learning opportunities for students. Participants characterized collaboration as educators working together on a lesson or project to help students succeed in the classroom.

The results also reflected the continuing challenges SLs have in building collaborative relationships with CTs. The data provided insight into the apprehension CTs might experience collaborating with a school librarian. CTs may feel as if collaborating will take more time to accomplish than working independently. Additionally, CTs still do not instinctively view the SL as an instructional partner. These views held by CTs can serve as a hindrance to developing a campus-wide culture of collaboration.

The SLs overwhelmingly reported that their collaborative efforts were self-initiated. Unfortunately, none indicated that they had any proactive administrative support. On the contrary, some reported that their administrators had no idea they were trained and expected to engage in collaborative instructional efforts.

Implications for Practice

The participants in this study agreed that collaboration is important and described collaboration as a positive experience in which each party brought their own interests, background, and strengths to the development and assessment of student learning. However, they noted that successful collaboration cannot be achieved unless school librarians develop positive relationships with the teachers on their campus. The CTs outlined specific practices SLs could adopt for achieving this, while the SLs described methods for marketing their collaborative services.

Relationship-Building Practices

The following practices may be helpful in enabling SLs to build relationships with CTs. First, the SL should be ready to make connections to the school's instructional program by learning the skills and standards being taught in the classroom. Attending teacher-focused meetings such as PLC activities, faculty meetings, and department or grade-level meetings on a regular basis will help SLs become familiar with students' learning needs and demonstrate that SLs are willing to support what is being taught in the classroom.

Second, SLs should initiate the collaborative effort with CTs through a personal approach. SLs should take time to build rapport with CTs, inquire about what they are teaching, and ask how the SL can best support them. When reaching out to CTs, SLs should be persistent and diligent, but not pushy. SLs can build rapport with CTs by letting them know that SLs are there to support and assist CTs fulfill their responsibility of getting through an enormous amount of curriculum during the school year.

Third, when CTs indicate interest, SLs should begin by asking what CTs are open to collaborating on, and then plan a small project together. SLs must be willing to compromise as needed to support the CT.

Finally, SLs can engage in the "snowball effect" of building additional collaborative relationships by jointly communicating the positive aspects of the experience with other CTs.

Marketing Methods for Collaboration

Marketing the SL as an instructional partner is key to developing collaborative relationships with CTs. SLs can accomplish this through several methods. First, they can invite administrators into the classroom when a collaborative lesson occurs to observe firsthand how powerful and rewarding it can be for students. Second, SLs can develop a variety of displays, lessons, and activities to demonstrate their ongoing support for the curriculum. Third, SLs can develop a website, blog, or social media account to market successfully completed library services, events, and collaborative activities to the school and community. Fourth, they can send individual messages to their CT colleagues with pictures, videos, and information to promote successful collaborative experiences.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the research represents data collected from a small sample of school librarians and classroom teachers at secondary schools in the Central Valley of California. The results cannot be generalized to the elementary level or to other school sites.

Second, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and at a time when schools were still providing instruction through fully virtual learning schedules. The virtual learning formats may have hampered collaborative efforts between SLs and CTs.

Third, due to time constraints, the data collection period took place over six weeks during the summer when many educators are on vacation, making it a challenge to get in touch with and secure research participants. Collecting data during the school year may lead to a larger participant pool.

Finally, participating classroom teachers and school librarians were selected from secondary schools that employed a certified school librarian. California consistently ranks at the bottom of states in the U.S. regarding the number of full-time, credentialed school librarians employed in public elementary and secondary schools. Few school librarians are employed in California middle and high schools, and even fewer in elementary schools, making the participant selection pool limited (CDE, 2021; Lance & Kachel, 2021).

Areas for Further Investigation

All participants affirmed that promoting school-wide collaboration is critical but can take time and diligence on the part of SLs. Further research is needed regarding passive and active forms of advocacy.

Also, as previously mentioned, the study was conducted during the summer after the 2020–2021 school year, during which most K–12 California public schools operated under virtual learning formats for much of the year. This study should be repeated after completing a regular, in-person school year to collect data on more-recent collaborations between SLs and CTs without such extenuating circumstances. Extending the research time frame could also positively impact the number of study participants.

Additional studies could be conducted to examine if and how collaboration practices changed as a result of the shifts to virtual learning required during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, a majority of the CT study participants were English Language Art teachers. Future studies would benefit from securing CT participants from a variety of subject areas and/or examining the data by SL/CT pair.

Conclusion

Creating collaborative instructional experiences is critical to supporting classroom teachers and improving student achievement. SLs have unique training and expertise that can support classroom, school, and district learning goals. The purpose of this study was to discover methods and practices that have led to successful collaboration between SLs and CTs. The results revealed four themes that can help SLs develop successful collaborative experiences: creating a culture of collaboration, making collaboration relevant to the curriculum, starting small, and advocating for collaboration. To achieve successful collaborative experiences, relationships that increase the possibilities for successful collaboration must be established. Utilizing the four themes identified through this study and focusing first on building relationships, SLs and CTs can shed past apprehensions of working together and forge successful collaborations in the future, creating highly engaging and effective learning experiences in the classrooms and school libraries to the benefit of all on campus—students, teachers, librarians, and administrators alike.

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Appendix A: Classroom Teacher Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Why did you become a teacher?
   a. How did you get to the position you are in now?
   b. How many years have you been in education?
   c. What subjects have you taught?

3. What does collaboration mean to you?

4. What are your expectations regarding collaboration between teachers and librarians?

5. What perceptions did you have prior to collaborating with your school librarian?

6. Does your principal/administration promote collaboration between teachers and the school librarian?

7. What preparation or training did you receive in your teacher credentialing program to prepare you to collaborate with school librarians?

8. Tell me about a specific time you collaborated.

9. Did your feelings regarding collaborating with your school librarian change after working together?

10. Did the collaboration improve your student engagement or achievement in any way?

Appendix B: School Librarian Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Why did you become a school librarian?
   a. How did you get to the position you are in now?
   b. How many years have you been in education?
   c. What did you do prior to becoming a school librarian?

3. How has your job/role changed, if at all, since the implementation of library standards?

4. How has your job/role changed, if at all, since the implementation of Common Core State Standards?

5. What does collaboration mean to you?

6. What are your expectations regarding collaboration between teachers and librarians?

7. Tell me about a specific time you collaborated.

8. How often are you called upon by the administration to assist with teacher professional development?

9. What, if any, PLCs do you participate in on your campus?

10. Do teachers come to you for assistance with integrating information literacy skills into their lessons?

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