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Classroom-Library Collaboration Case Study

21st century school librarians are called on to be more than just the keepers of books. According to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), “The teaching of 21st-century skills requires that all aspects of teaching and learning are built on collaborative partnerships” (21).  School librarians are expected to work as collaborators with the school community for one common, ultimate goal: student success.  As Hamilton states, “learning is a collaborative conversation” (35).  For the learning environment to flourish, the school librarian must be involved and collaborating with not only classroom teachers, but students and administrators as well.  Montiel-Overall defines collaboration as “a trusting, working relationship between two or more equal participants involved in *shared thinking, shared planning,* and *shared creation of integrated instruction*” (150).  When collaboration between teachers and the school librarian takes place, positive results occur for all the stakeholders involved.

Although librarians may not be a direct part of every student’s education every day, the impact they can make through collaborative partnerships with teachers has the most benefits for students.  “Collaboration is the single professional behavior of teacher-librarians that most affects student achievement” (Kimmel 88).  When a school librarian and a classroom teacher work together, they can create an entirely new learning experience for the student.  Results from a study found that “greater teacher and school librarian collaboration is a means to improve what and how students learn” (Montiel-Overall and Jones 53).  Effective use of technology, including Web 2.0 tools, is becoming more prevalent in terms of what students are expected to learn and need to be successful in the 21st-century.  With these types of shifts in learning, shifts in teaching need to be present.  One way to put this into practice is to put the learning back on the student.  “Together with the classroom teacher, the school librarian empowers students to take an active role in shaping their learning” (American Association of School Librarians 20).  With the collaboration of the teacher and librarian, students are able to experience a different, more individualized type of learning through the lower student to teacher ratio.  “The kids get a lot more individualized attention because they are working with two teachers instead of one (Peg)” (Moreillon, “Kindergarten Teacher: Peg’s Testimonial”).  When students enter the 21st-century work environment, they will be expected to participate in collaborative relationships.  According the American Association of School Librarians, when librarians model “such collaborative relationships”, they help to “change the culture of the learning community” and they set students up for success (21).  What is the right balance of collaboration between the school librarian and the teacher as well as letting the student participate in the processes?

Moreillon states that “when a teacher can brainstorm with someone who has a different background and skills, they have the ability to create great things” (8).  The librarian can “gather and create resources, connect students and teachers to one another and focus on the quality of the collaboration effort between the teacher and librarians” (Moreillon, “Co-teaching Collaboration”).  A teacher should recognize and utilize what the librarian has to offer besides the traditional duties as seen in the past.  When effective collaboration occurs, classroom teachers benefit in that they are able to take the curriculum to a deeper level.  Third grade teacher Judy Pickeral says that her collaboration with the librarian “enables me to take a curriculum which I think has been presented to us by the state at a very superficial level and to take that curriculum deeper…(Judy P.)” (Moreillon, “Third-grade Teacher Testimonial”).   Course requirements look differently for pre-service teachers than they do for pre-service librarians.  One study noted that “teacher-librarian collaboration has received far less attention than teacher-teacher collaboration” (Latham, Gross, Witte 2).  What and how should pre-service teachers be learning from their university studies about the importance of these instructional partnerships as a possible way to help bridge that gap upon entering the profession?  “Helping preservice teachers to collaborate effectively in their preservice teacher education programs should prepare them for collegial work in schools and for career-long development as professionals” (Moreillon 22).  Without a doubt, another benefit to these instructional partnerships is the sharing of more/different ideas and knowledge.  Educators are constantly battling the “not enough hours in the day” problem and co-planning is a valuable way to make more time for the actual teaching/learning that takes place.  “There is the opportunity on a day to day basis for the teacher-librarian to use the skills that she has to improve teaching in classroom teachers (Paula Godfrey)” (Moreillon, “Principals Know:  Librarians are the Heart of the School”).  An important finding in one study notes that teachers do want a librarian to plan with.  Teachers “recognize the value of the lessons provided in the library but they also see the influence of the teacher librarian in planning lessons for their own classrooms” (Kimmel 93). When these benefits are unclear or not evident on a school campus, how can we encourage and demonstrate to classroom teachers the importance of the librarian’s role in a school community and the importance of building strong instructional partnerships with each other for the benefit of all?

Although the view of the school librarian’s role is changing, school librarians are often having to prove their value and demonstrate through collaborative practice the benefits of such instructional partnerships to the school community.  According to the American Association of School Librarians, “he or she understands the curriculum of the school thoroughly and can partner with teachers to create exciting learning experiences in an information and media-rich environment” (19).   Having this knowledge can provide the teacher with valuable suggestions for technology and media integration that as a result can increase the academic achievement level of the campus.  “As a principal stated, ‘teacher and school library media specialist collaboration provides higher achievement. The librarian is the only one who impacts all the children leading to academic success and works with every single teacher” (Moreillon 7).  The role of learner is another benefit for school librarians that comes from effective, collaborative relationships.  One example offered from the American Association of School Librarians is that “the school librarian can learn from students about popular new technologies” and “in turn, the school librarian can research these technologies and demonstrate how they can be used effectively in the learning environment” (20-21).  Collaborating can put the school librarian at the forefront of the school community and evolve to important leadership positions on a school campus.  According to principal Shenequa Coles, “Our librarian is a member of our leadership team, she assists with decision making that the team has to do and that includes department chairs and administrators” (Moreillon, “Principals Know:  School Librarians are the Heart of the School”). From a leadership standpoint, how can school librarians encourage classroom teachers to put forth the effort it takes to build strong, collaborative partnerships and prove the value to those who are less interested?

Student achievement is the central focus for school administrators.  In encouraging and expecting librarians and teachers to work together as instructional partners, student success can easily translate into being beneficial for the administration.  “Library program development and collaborative teaching are aspects of quality library services that can affect students’ standardized test scores.  Classroom-library collaboration can help schools meet local, state, and national goals for student achievement” (Moreillon 4).  Are administrators willing to give up some control in common learning practices and allow, as well as encourage the collaborations to take place more often than not?   “Many principals today are inviting faculty to consider the importance of collaborative practices at their work” (Moreillon 3) because they realize the overall benefits that will in turn help the district and the school’s future.

The librarian’s role continues to change and evolve.  As we prepare students to be successful in the 21st-century, librarians need to be campus leaders and agents of change within the classroom and school community as a whole.  In regards to collaboration, "the ultimate value of these social relationships is the benefit of being able to access these connections to meet educational objectives” (Schultz-Jones 24).  Therefore students, teachers, librarians and administrators should recognize the obvious positive educational outcomes that come from collaboration.

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