Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Leadership

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Being a one-of-a-kind professional in a school is often portrayed as a lonely condition for school librarians.

From a productive perspective, being unique among educators is an opportunity for leadership. Teacher librarians bring a special set of principles to the learning context, as well as a unique set of skills and understandings. It takes leadership skills to help others recognize these perspectives, and it takes a leader to create opportunities so students can benefit from the teacher librarian's special skills and knowledge. Consider the following ways the librarian's expertise and principles enhance the learning context and experience.

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Knowledge of the inquiry process is a particularly significant component of the school librarian's repertoire. In today's information universe, there is little challenge in posing encyclopedic questions that ask students to merely gather and report facts. In the view of the school librarian, this kind of information-seeking is not where inquiry ends, but rather begins—gathering background knowledge that can lead to further questions. For the librarian, the heart of inquiry-based learning is the generation of deep questions to yield deep learning. To that end, the notion of concept-based learning offers an approach to research that engages students in seeking answers to questions that grow out of curiosity and that are best investigated via the inquiry process that is a central principle of librarianship. Advocating for this kind of deep learning obliges leadership from the school librarian.

Deep inquiry requires more time on the part of learner and teacher—sometimes causing teachers to express concern for the pressure to "cover" material, when in fact librarians want to encourage students to be engaged in the "uncovering" and discovery of knowledge that comes from deeper inquiry. This perspective calls for the librarian to be the leader—to ask the questions of teachers that cause reflection: *Do we want this activity to be a lesson in Googling for facts,* *or do we want to see students engaging to analyze and synthesize, to speculate and create? Can we replace the animal fact-finding quest with a conceptual approach that leads students to pose queries about extinction, for example, with questions like, "What caused the bald eagle to be listed on the endangered species list, and what happened to support its revival?" Are there lessons to be learned and applied to other endangered species? Or, "How is climate change affecting the loss of species, for example sea turtles?"* Here, students are grappling with questions for which the answer does not reside in a simple Google search. Instead, they are applying an inquiry process requiring them to evaluate information for authority and bias, integrate information from a variety of sources, synthesize information, speculate, and understand that for some questions there is no definitive answer—yet.

This kind of learning prepares students for the information universe of their generation, not the information landscape of previous generations. Yet the school librarian must exert leadership to shift some colleagues' notions of information-seeking to a more complex level and make the case that such inquiry is worth the time and uncer-

tainty for the quality of learning that it promises.

READING AND LITERATURE

In April 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruled that Detroit students have a constitutional right to literacy, as it is a foundational skill for a functioning citizenry (Goldstein, 2020). There is no shortage of educators who are dedicated to students becoming literate. While many teachers focus on reading and literature, the teacher librarian's expertise brings a different perspective; in addition to learning to read well, librarians place great value on learning to love reading. Leadership in this context may include defining the mission of the library as it differs from the reading classroom. The librarian may share research about what reading is considered "valid" (e.g., graphic novels, audiobooks) and recommend diverse selections to replace some traditional curricular novels. Most importantly, the librarian who leads stands up to the leveling and labeling of books when teachers ask them to set reading-level parameters as students select books from the library. The librarian as a leader points to the viewpoint expressed by Fountas and Pinnell, developers of one of the most widely used leveling systems, who adamantly oppose using leveling to limit what children may choose to read (Parrott, 2017).

COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

An area where the leadership of a teacher librarian is especially powerful is collaborative teaching. Because of the librarian's position in the building, she/he is familiar with content

across grade levels and subjects and can help connect the curriculum dots for students and teachers alike. Bringing an interdisciplinary view can make learning deeper and more authentic. Coplanning and coteaching allow the librarian to teach both the students and the collaborative teacher skills that may be outside their subject area knowledge, granting another opportunity for the librarian's leadership to shine. For example, are teachers guiding students toward effective lateral reading on the web? Are they teaching their students how to do reverse image searching? Are they expecting their students to develop high-order research questions? Are they teaching students search strategies to find best-match results? Are students learning the difference between database searching and Internet searching? These and many other information skills reside in the expertise of the librarian, but it takes leadership from the librarian to bring these skill sets forward.

COLLEGE READINESS

Discussions of college preparation often focus on content learning. How

well prepared are students in science? Math? History? However, in addition to content knowledge, research suggests that students are advantaged when they arrive at college with skills in developing a good research question, knowledge of authoritative sources, understanding of biases, practice at integrating information from various sources, referencing information without plagiarizing, and recognizing the attributes of a thesis statement (Donham, 2014). It takes a posture of leadership by the librarian to advocate among secondary school teachers, who tend to highly value disciplinary content, that the time taken to give students experiences at authentic inquiry will serve their students well when they arrive in the college classroom.

TECHNOLOGY

With ever-changing educational technology, many educators find it difficult and time consuming to locate, evaluate, and implement new tools effectively. The teacher librarian's experience with innovative practices, evaluation of new materials according to established criteria, and opportunities to work with

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a variety of students and staff allow the matching of teachers to tools that enhance teaching. Based on knowledge of subject area curriculum, a teacher's methods and style, and personal experience in providing professional development, librarians can provide personalized recommendations for resources and evidence-based tools that align with current pedagogy. Librarians also lead through modeling and teaching effective use of technology to develop content knowledge. Modern information literacy skills are interrelated with such technology literacy concepts as keyword searching, filtering results, organizational tags, and intellectual property.

Librarians have another important role in technology leadership. The librarian, as an information specialist, maintains current awareness of the research surrounding technology's place in teaching and learning. By sharing research-based evidence about technology, the librarian can pose reflective questions about the way technology is being used in schools. While certain technologies can advance learning, some applications can distract or undermine it. For example, recent cognitive science research brings into question the efficacy of note-taking by keyboard compared with note-taking by hand, as well as distinctions between reading online compared with reading in print (Aragón-Mendizábal et al., 2016; Coiro, 2011; Luo et al., 2018). Bringing this research to colleagues and generating reflective discussion on decisions about the most efficacious application of technology for learning calls for leadership, especially as parents press schools about the role of technology in the school without an understanding that effective technology use requires selectivity and attention to research evidence. The librarian can lead by starting the conversations: Are instructional practices grounded in what is known about learning?

LIBRARIANS AS LEADERS

Bennis (1999) proposes a set of traits for successful leaders in knowledge work (work in the information sector or people who think for a living). These characteristics apply directly to school librarians:

Technical competence. School librarians have knowledge of information organization and management, technology, and learning resources. As information specialists, they are skilled at finding research evidence to support practice.

Conceptual skill. School librarians have considerable procedural knowledge, but they also think in terms of principles and concepts. Principles of organization, access, confidentiality, and ethical use of information guide their policy making, while conceptual understanding of information systems informs their resource management and information dissemination.

People skills. School librarians know they cannot be successful in isolation. They communicate, inspire, collaborate, and delegate.

Judgment. As managers of substantial space and resources, school librarians are called on to make decisions promptly, even with imperfect data. They make daily decisions regarding resource allocation, technology, scheduling, work assignments, and instruction.

Character. Grounded in the foun-

dations of librarianship, school librarians are inspired by a set of principles that guide professional behavior.

This is an accurate portrayal of the attributes of librarians who lead. While they serve as teachers, librarians are a special breed of teacher with their own set of values and principles, skills and knowledge, and viewpoints. This one-of-a-kind professional can influence and change learning experiences for students once the responsibility for leadership is embraced as a part of the profession.

CONCLUSION

While it is easy to feel alone among educators, librarians' uniqueness is an asset that strengthens learning and teaching by bringing special expertise and viewpoints. But the asset is only capitalized when librarians lead—when they demonstrate to others their value in the learning process. Our book *Enhancing Teaching and Learning—A Leadership Guide for School Librarians* (Donham & Sims, 2020) provides insight into the unique role of librarians as leaders who possess distinct skills and perspectives that enhance learning and teaching.

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