

Research in Teacher-Librarianship and the Institutionalization of Change

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[Ken Haycock](#), Professor and Director, School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia.

Research in school librarianship provides the foundation and direction for effective school library practice, and there is ample evidence of the impact of school library media specialists and school library media centers on students' learning, given certain conditions and criteria. Similarly, research in the implementation of change, including curriculum implementation and staff development, provides useful guidelines for the institutionalization of school library programs. Recognizing and building on this research provides the framework for our continued effectiveness and even existence. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the International Association of School Librarianship annual conference in 1994.

One often hears the refrain that there is no research in teacher-librarianship, no proof of effect on student achievement, no concrete evidence of value for money. If only some strong justification existed for school library media centers and school library media specialists, there would be no need to advocate and lobby for adequate staff, collections and facilities. There is, however, a strong research base for teacher-librarianship; there is evidence of effect on student achievement; and there is ample justification for the presence and effective use of library media specialists and school library media centers. Why, then, are there ongoing problems of support?

Research remains unfamiliar to many in our profession. That which is read is subject to criticism concerning timing, location, and participants. If we accept our own research, and build on it, we will progress far beyond the generalization of a single experience and the intuition alone of the principal, teacher, and library media specialist. Nothing is ever certain in a complex world, but research that is reliable, valid, and replicated has value and worth.

Having been made aware of effective library media programs and services, we find it difficult to put them in place. The value of the library media specialist and the library media center may be made apparent to principals and teachers, and they may recognize the appropriate and effective roles of the principal, teacher, and library media specialist as partners in educational enterprises, but implementation remains difficult. It does not reach a stage of institutionalization so that it becomes an integral, essential part of the school, and it may not occur at all. In this case, the research in curriculum implementation and staff development can provide guidance for the successful initiation, implementation, and institutionalization of school library media -programs.

The term "library media specialist" is used in the United States; in many parts of the world, the term is "teacher-librarian." Both terms denote a qualified teacher with classroom teaching experience and additional post-baccalaureate education in library and information studies. The library media specialist performs a unified role, uniquely combining teacher and librarian, and

may work full-time or part-time in the school library media center. Similarly, the term “library media center” is used here, although “school resource center” is also common. The library media center houses the school’s collection of curriculum resources, including information books and other media, and imaginative literature. These are coherently and consistently organized for easy physical access. The library media specialist plans with classroom teachers to develop and implement programs that ensure intellectual access to information by increasingly independent student learners.

Research in Teacher-Librarianship

The research in teacher-librarianship is rich and diverse, and recent publications provide useful guides to the research and scholarly literature.(1) This review is delimited to the characteristics of effective programs that affect student achievement in a significant way and that have the support of school principals, superintendents, and other educational decision-makers. It does not include, therefore, factors related to the selection and management of resources, to facilities, or to general school and classroom practice.

There is a positive relationship between the level of library media center service available and student scholastic achievement. In schools with good library media centers and the services of a library media specialist, students perform significantly better on tests for basic research skills, including locational skills, outlining and notetaking, and the knowledge and use of reference materials, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias.(2) They also perform significantly better in the area of reading comprehension and in their ability to express effectively ideas concerning their readings.(3) Indeed, among school and community factors that determine academic achievement, the size of the library media center staff and collection is second only to the absence of at-risk conditions, particularly poverty and low educational attainment among adults.(4) Of four other factors that predict student achievement—school library media center collection size, school library media center expenditure, public library collection size, and public library expenditure—the greatest predictor is school library media center collection size.(5)

The evidence is similarly clear that more reading occurs where there is a school library and a library media specialist; children also read more when they live close to a public library.(6) Students in schools with centralized library media centers and library media specialists not only read more, they enjoy reading more.(7) A print-rich environment, including larger library collections and a comfortable and quiet atmosphere, affect reading, literacy development, and reading scores.(8) Further, providing time for free voluntary reading in schools has a positive impact on reading comprehension, vocabulary development, spelling, written style, oral/aural language, and control of grammar.(9)

School library media centers with full-time library media specialists even contribute to the development of positive self-concepts.(10)

Why are these gains not realized in all situations and circumstances? First, the role of the library media specialist requires clarification if there is to be any improvement in existing library media programs.(11) Principals, teachers, and library media specialists themselves have many misconceptions about the role of the library media specialist in the instructional program.(12)

indicating that states and school districts need to provide a clearer definition of this role.(13) Library media specialists need to take an active part in defining their role, particularly in cooperative program planning and teaching. They must communicate their role more effectively to principals and teachers through in-service programs and an emphasis on work with people more than with management and production processes.(14) It has been shown that library media specialists who place a higher priority on personal relations offer more services to teachers and students; library media specialists who rate personal relations as a lower priority spend more time on circulation and related tasks.(15)

To be effective, library media specialists require teaching qualifications and classroom experience prior to further education and training in their field. Prior successful teaching experience is necessary for library media specialists to perceive and solve instructional problems.(16) Exemplary library media specialists, as identified in the professional literature and by principals, display the traits of exemplary teachers as well. They plan with teachers, use flexible and innovative teaching and public relations approaches, teach well, provide continuous access, design flexible policies, and develop collections in support of the curriculum.(17) More years of classroom teaching experience and more preparation in curriculum development and implementation are needed, however.(18) Superintendents, principals, and teachers consistently point to the need for library media specialists to have more classroom teaching experience if programs are to be developed credibly and successfully.(19)

The development of student competence is most effective when classroom instruction is integrated with cooperative program planning and team teaching by two equal teaching partners: the classroom teacher and the library media specialist.(20) Minimal gains in research and study skills can be achieved through instruction by the classroom teacher alone or by the library media specialist alone;(21) effective instruction depends on the cooperative effort of both teacher and library media specialist. Stated another way, scheduled library skills classes taught solely by the library media specialist are not as effective as integrated, cooperatively planned and taught programs.(22) Indeed, not only do flexibly scheduled library media centers provide greater academic benefits, but students themselves believe that the library media center is more useful in their schoolwork than students in schools with fixed schedules.(23) When flexibly scheduled, the library media specialist and library media center can have a significant effect on student achievement in information handling and use and in content areas. The most significant changes in library media programs occur when the library media specialist moves to flexible scheduling and curriculum-integrated instruction; positive, cooperative relations with teachers, administrators, and students contribute to this success.(24)

It is difficult to imagine why library media specialists are not involved in cooperative program planning and team teaching as equal teaching partners with classroom colleagues to the extent that principals, teachers, and library media specialists themselves believe they should be.(25) If the teacher uses the library media center and consults with the library media specialist about planning student work, then the use of the library media center is greater.(26) In fact, students rate schools more highly when there is agreement and communication among principals, teachers, and library media specialists regarding program objectives, and where there is planned, consistent, and integrated instruction in library media center use.(27) Important factors that affect library media specialist involvement in curricular issues include the principal's attitude toward

the library media specialist's role; teacher preference for library media specialists with successful classroom teaching experience and a teacher's frame of reference; and the number of support staff and degree of teacher understanding of the role of the library media specialist and the potential of the library media center.(28) Perhaps most important, library media specialists require extensive training in cooperative program planning and team teaching that builds on prior successful classroom teaching experience. Programs that educate library media specialists would do well to structure programs around cooperative program planning and teaching and the skills necessary to convince educators that library media specialists are vital partners in instruction.(29) These competencies, however, tend not to be supervised in practice to the extent that other competencies are.

Cooperative program planning and teaching as an instructional development activity requires more social interaction with other teachers than do other roles of the library media specialist, yet there is a low level of communication between teachers and library media specialists.(30) Library media specialists may also need education and training in social interaction skills. Those in exemplary centers are extroverted and independent: as leaders they have "tough poise."(31) Those who are less cautious and more extroverted than their colleagues tend to be more successful; indeed, the best pair of predictors of high circulation of materials in the library media center is high extroversion and a high degree of curriculum involvement by the library media specialist.(32)

Because principals, teachers, and library media specialists all agree on the importance of cooperative program planning and teaching, all three should be involved in resolving issues mitigating against substantial involvement. Library media specialists need to organize more inservice training for colleagues,(33) and educators in library science need to revise programs to include courses that foster cooperation and understanding between teachers and library media specialists.(34)

Despite evidence that students benefit when school and public libraries cooperate, public librarians and library media specialists communicate very little with one another,(35) even though students who use school library media centers are more likely to use public libraries.(36) While duplication of services between school and public libraries may be lamented, it will not be rectified by administrators or practitioners in either institution. Practitioners even question the motives behind overt suggestions for cooperation; self-preservation and protection of territory override the ideal of cooperation.(37) Adequate funding, staffing, and "personality" most positively affect cooperation, while inadequate funding and staffing, governance at the state level, and work schedules most adversely affect cooperation.(38)

Institutionalization of Change

The research literature provides considerable evidence and guidance as to what constitutes effectiveness in the implementation of any desired change.(39) While this overview cannot do justice to the extent of research in this field, sufficient conclusions can be drawn to have an impact on the effective implementation of cooperative program planning and teaching, and flexible scheduling across a school district.

The content of effective staff development is research-based,(40) proven effective,(41) practical,(42) and relevant to identified needs and problems faced in the classroom.(43) These are all evident in the effective use of the library media specialist through cooperative program planning and teaching and flexible scheduling. Successful implementation requires that this new program have clear goals(44) and that the nature of the change be explicit and realistic,(45) paying particular attention to the context in which teachers work.(46)

An effective implementation plan is based on an understanding of the developmental aspects of change;(47) sets clear expectations and manageable objectives;(48) incorporates realistic time lines,(49) allocation of resources, and monitoring and feedback procedures;(50) and incorporates the professional development of consultants, principals, and resource teachers as well as classroom teachers.(51) In other words, change is a process, not an event like one workshop, and requires the understanding of all “stakeholders.”

A district policy to guide and support implementation and a district plan for a structured implementation process is necessary.(52) Priorities must be established if a district or state is facing competing demands.(53) Too often, a district library media coordinator will lobby for a change in programs while other administrators are leading change efforts in other areas, resulting in competition for time, attention, and resources. The response of the school may be, understandably, to set its own priorities or ignore them all.

The importance of the new approach, expectations for its use,(54) and implementation plans should be communicated widely throughout the system.(55) Significant changes in behavior, roles, and responsibilities expected of teachers need to be described in detail, clarifying both the similarities and differences in current practices,(56) and they need the opportunity to discuss implications and adaptation with colleagues.(57) Effective change procedures also require some pressure(58) as well as a support system.(59) Both peer pressure and peer support are often accomplished by working with a school staff rather than through cross-district workshops.

Library media specialists and their advocates will need to work more effectively with senior education staff. School superintendents support the need for professional library media specialists and generally understand the potential impact of a library media specialist, but they nevertheless often set other priorities.(60) Many superintendents believe that a library media specialist is an absolute necessity and few would staff a library media center with only an aide, but a sizable minority still see the library media specialist as a luxury.(61) While sometimes skeptical about the influence of the library media specialist and library media center on teaching, superintendents nevertheless believe that teachers would notice if the library media center were closed and would have to teach differently.(62) Superintendents also believe that the teaching background and experience of the library media specialist may be too limited to have a significant impact on the school.(63) Clearly, library media specialists and their superintendents need to communicate more often and more effectively if successful implementation is to take place.(64)

Implementation requires the involvement and support of the right people and groups within the district at the right time. Both educational and political criteria should be used to select a district planning committee to ensure the quality of the plan and its acceptability.(65) One goal is the

creation of a well-informed group of teachers and administrators with a clear sense of mission and the confidence that can bring about change;(66) such an internal advocacy group improves the chances for change by putting pressure on people and the organization.(67)

The implementation of change requires persistent advocacy and continual leadership and school support.(68) Program leaders, like district coordinators, need to anticipate initial resistance, recognize how people feel about change, deal with conflicts, know what can be done to lessen anxiety, and know how to facilitate the change process.(69) The library media coordinator can have a positive effect on program development in the school district;(70) even the existence of a coordinator seems to result in significantly higher implementation of guiding principles for personnel, budget, purchasing, production, access and delivery systems, program evaluation, collections, and facilities.(71) The higher the coordinator's position is placed in the hierarchy, the wider the range of activities that can be performed in the development and regulation of school library media programs and services.(72) The coordinator must be more involved in curriculum and public relations work, however.

Above all else, the role of the principal is the key factor in the development of an effective school library media program. The principal is the single most important player; he or she has a direct, active role in leading any process of change by becoming familiar with the nature of the change and by working with staff to develop, execute, and monitor a school implementation plan.(73) Principals are in the strongest position to conduct personal advocacy of innovations in the schools.(74) Through visible and clear support, the principal can significantly affect the implementation and institutionalization of educational change.(75) The district needs to provide training and follow-up for principals to help them take responsibility for facilitating implementation in their schools.(76)

Successful implementation requires principal support both substantively, by ensuring that resources are available and schedules are accommodating, and psychologically, by encouraging teachers, acknowledging their concerns, providing personal time and assistance, rewarding their efforts, and communicating that the implementation is a school priority.(77) Successful implementation requires that principals create the climate (e.g., collegiality, communication, and trust)(78) and the mechanisms (e.g., time and opportunity, interaction, technical sharing and assistance, and ongoing staff development) to support the implementation of innovation.(79) Even the attitude of the principal toward the role of the library media specialist affects the library media specialist's involvement in curricular issues.(80) Indeed, exemplary school library media centers are characterized by strong administrative support.(81) Principals in schools with exemplary library media programs integrate the library media center in instructional programs, encourage student and teacher use, and provide flexible scheduling.(82)

Plans for effective staff development recognize that change is a gradual and difficult process,(83) provide sufficient time to produce demonstrable results,(84) and demonstrate that the strategies will bring about short- and long-term benefits to students.(85) Short presentations can be invaluable as awareness sessions and in helping people to make decisions about those areas in which extended workshops would be beneficial,(86) but they will not result in changed practice. The steps in effective staff development include the presentation of information, demonstration of the change, an opportunity to practice, feedback,(87) and on-site assistance to staff in the form

of technical coaching and/or peer support.(88) This is particularly effective through a collegial support system that values growth activities, provides moral support, and facilitates small-group interaction.(89)

Building on the research in teacher-librarianship through role clarification, cooperative program planning and teaching, and flexible scheduling-and in curriculum implementation and staff development through careful planning, effective leadership, credible inservice, and coaching-library media specialists and other educators can help library media specialists and library media centers to become effective agents for student achievement. Too often we believe so much in the value of our programs that we think a “one-shot” workshop will change the way principals schedule, the way teachers teach, and the way library media specialists plan with colleagues-and then we are disappointed when these changes do not occur. The implementation of a change as significant as cooperative program planning and teaching and flexible scheduling, however, requires the involvement of all the partners, with systematic and ongoing training, pressure, and support.

With successful programs in place, library media specialists can then assume more responsibility for writing about their role and about collaboratively planned programs for professional journals read by teachers and administrators.(90) This accepted means of communication is not being used to its fullest potential to highlight the contribution of library media specialists and school library media centers and the curricular role of the library media specialist.(91) This can be done effectively only by library media specialists themselves.(92) It is critical that principals and teachers read about such exciting approaches as resource-based teaching and learning in the journals they read. The successes of cooperatively planned and taught units of study need to be celebrated not only in our publications but also in the publications of our teacher-partners and those of principal leaders.

As an information profession, we need only learn from our research and build on its precepts in order to become that force for excellence that is within our grasp. We have the evidence that we can make a difference through cooperative program planning and team teaching with flexible scheduling; we have the principles for the effective initiation, implementation, and institutionalization of change. We now need only to do it.

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