

Enabling School Librarians to Serve as Instructional Leaders of Multiple Literacies

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Abstract

This case study was conducted to explore how school district leaders can foster the development of effective school libraries in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies. Participants included district-level personnel and building-level school librarians. The district-level personnel consisted of those who held leadership roles in areas related to the school library program: teaching and learning, assessment, professional development, and instructional technology. Data were collected from multiple sources, including interviews, focus groups, documents, and observations. An exploratory method of coding was employed to organize the data into categories from which three themes emerged: ambiguous expectations, ability to fully engage with the instructional program, and relationships. Results revealed two main barriers that inhibit the development of an effective school library: a) ambiguous administrative expectations for school librarians, and b) school librarians' limited participation in the K–12 instructional program. Conversely, results demonstrated that positive relationships serve as significant supports for enabling school librarians to function as instructional leaders of multiple literacies.

Introduction

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Research has demonstrated that school leaders have little to no understanding of the school librarian's instructional leadership role and have received little to no training in how to lead this population (Lewis 2018, 2019). Though the standards for the school library field state that school librarians should be equipped and able to serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies in K–12 education, barriers exist that inhibit this from becoming a reality in many schools. One of these barriers is a lack of administrative support in the form of a district library supervisor to develop a vision for and provide support to the district's school library program and its personnel. Very little research has been conducted to examine the support needs of in-service school librarians (Weeks et al. 2017), and no research has been conducted to explore how to equip existing leadership to effectively lead its population of school librarians in a school district

that lacks an official district library supervisor. Previous studies have examined barriers and enablers affecting school librarians' enacting of leadership roles in relation to technology integration and digital literacy (Calvert 2016; Johnston 2012; Hughes-Hassell and Hanson-Baldauf 2008). Among the barriers and enablers previously identified were the absence or presence of effective leadership of school librarians at the district level. However, no studies have examined leadership of and by school librarians through the lens of multiple literacies. The purpose of this study is to explore how school district leaders can foster the development of an effective school library in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective School Librarians and Libraries

In its position statement "Definition of an Effective School Library," the American Association of School Librarians (2018a) outlined the three fundamental components of an effective school library. First, the effective school library is adequately staffed with a state-certified school librarian who:

- serves as an instructional leader and teacher;
- supports the development of digital learning, participatory learning, inquiry learning, technology literacies, and information literacy; and
- supports, supplements, and elevates the literacy experience through guidance and motivational reading initiatives.

Second, the effective school library has current digital and print resources and technology. Third, it provides regular professional development and collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians. A related AASL position statement "Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries" describes the minimum staffing requirements needed for an effective school library to positively impact a school's learning environment. These include one or more full-time certified school librarians, full-time clerical and technical support staff, and a district-level school library supervisor (AASL 2019).

In 2007 AASL published *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*. These school library standards expanded "the definition of information literacy to include multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological" (AASL 2009, 5). These were the first set of school library standards to specifically address the concept of "multiple literacies." AASL's most-recent iteration of school library standards published in 2018, *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*, refined the multiple types of literacies that school librarians were expected to address within a school's instructional program. In addition to continuing to support traditional literacy efforts by providing access to and promoting a wide variety of high-quality reading material in multiple formats, school librarians are tasked with developing "the information, media, visual, and technical literacies of learners" (AASL 2018b, 89).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is defined as a role in which an educational leader defines a school's mission, manages its instructional program, and promotes a positive learning climate (Hallinger 2005). Several functions of instructional leadership, as defined by Philip Hallinger and Joseph Murphy, specifically apply to the professional responsibilities of the school librarian. These responsibilities include supporting the school's instructional goals, regularly engaging with the instructional program, coordinating curriculum, and promoting professional learning (1985). School librarians primarily provide instructional leadership through a highly effective form of professional learning: collaboration (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017). Enacting a role similar to an instructional coach's role, a school librarian is expected to collaborate with classroom teachers to co-design, co-teach, and co-assess inquiry-based units of instruction that address multiple literacies (Lewis 2018, 2019). Within these collaborative relationships, the school librarian "helps the school achieve curricular goals and meet learners' personalized learning needs" (AASL 2018b, 89). Though instructional leadership can be provided through several avenues, the scope of this research study is limited to the responsibilities mentioned above.

Barriers to Leadership

Previous research has revealed many barriers that limit a school librarian's ability to provide this type of instructional leadership (Calvert 2016; Johnston 2012; Hughes-Hassell and Hanson-Baldauf 2008; Lewis 2018, 2019). These barriers primarily stem from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the school librarian's instructional role among school personnel, especially at the administrative level (Johnston 2012; Levitov 2013; Lewis 2018, 2019; Shannon 2012). School librarians report that they are expected to work within outdated or unclear job descriptions and evaluation processes (Elkins 2018; Lewis 2018, 2019). Additionally, they suffer from a lack of clarity in role definition that is made worse by competitive relationships with instructional technologists and instructional coaches (Elkins 2018; Johnston 2012; Lewis 2018, 2019; Merga 2020).

Administrators do not often view school librarians as instructional leaders. Consequently, they exclude school librarians from leadership opportunities and do not initiate or direct professional learning opportunities between school librarians and teachers. In addition, administrators either do not select or underutilize librarians to provide instructional leadership in English Language Arts or initiatives to improve students' literacy (Baker, Decman, and Willis 2020; Johnston 2012; Lewis 2018, 2019; McKeever, Bates, and Reilly 2017). School librarians often lack support and advocacy in the form of a school library supervisor at the district level. This circumstance contributes to a lack of a specific vision for the school library, omission from the district's strategic plan, and an inability to engage with a program of ongoing, specialized training to develop necessary technical skills, content knowledge and expertise, and leadership skills (Calvert 2016; Hughes-Hassell and Hanson-Baldauf 2008; Johnston 2012; Lewis 2018, 2019; Weeks et al. 2017).

Researchers have also reported that limited resources prevent many school librarians from serving as instructional leaders. Inadequate staffing in clerical assistance and technical support forces school librarians to focus primarily on clerical tasks and management of curricular resources. Limited time prevents school librarians from engaging with the instructional program.

Scheduling difficulties stemming from fixed schedules, a school-wide emphasis on standardized testing, assignment to multiple school sites, and closing the library for school events or non-instructional activities contribute to this barrier. Additional challenges arise when administrators assign multiple responsibilities to school librarians and pull them from the library to attend to other school duties. Teacher disinterest or resistance to working collaboratively with school librarians is a common outcome of these scheduling difficulties (Crary 2019; Johnston 2012; Hughes-Hassell and Hanson-Baldauf 2008; Lewis 2018, 2019; McKeever, Bates, and Reilly 2017; Merga 2020; Montiel-Overall 2010; Weeks et al. 2016).

Enablers for Leadership

Conversely, research has revealed specific supports that enable school librarians to serve in leadership roles. The primary enabler is realized through positive relationships, particularly between a supportive principal and a school librarian (Johnston 2012; Lewis 2018, 2019; Lupton 2016; Merga 2020). Large-scale school library impact studies have found that higher-performing schools tended to have principals that:

- met regularly with school librarians,
- valued the collaborative planning process between their school librarians and classroom teachers,
- recognized school librarians as model teachers, and
- viewed the school library as having a positive effect on student success (Hughes 2014; Lance, Rodney, and Russell 2007; Lance, Rodney, and Schwarz 2010; Lance, Schwarz, and Rodney 2014).

A supportive principal encourages school librarians to be part of decision-making processes by encouraging them to take on leadership roles and responsibilities such as serving on leadership teams and committees and providing professional development to teachers (Johnston 2012; Lance and Kachel 2018). Another distinct enabler is the development of collegial and collaborative relationships between school librarians and classroom teachers (Ash-Argyle and Shoham 2012; Harada 2016; Lance and Kachel 2018; Merga 2020; Montiel-Overall 2010).

A district library supervisor who possesses professional knowledge and experience with school libraries serves as another primary enabler of school librarians' enactment of leadership roles. A supervisor is tasked with addressing the issues and concerns of school librarians with decision-makers at the administrative level. The main responsibilities of a district library supervisor are to advocate for and develop a vision and mission for the district's library program, provide immediate support to building-level school librarians through regular meetings and advisement, and offer professional development designed to meet the needs of school librarians and their collaborative teaching partners (DiScala, Weeks, and Kodama 2019; Johnston 2012; Weeks et al. 2017). Ann Carlson Weeks et al. stated that "providing professional development for educators at all levels is important because the decisions made at the district level have direct implications at the building level, and have positive or negative impacts on student achievement" (2017, 5). The rapidly changing educational and technological landscape requires school librarians to develop specific leadership skills within the multiple literacies. School and district-wide professional learning opportunities are generally focused on meeting the needs of classroom teachers and fail to meet school librarians' professional growth needs. School librarians need and

want ongoing professional development that is relevant to and enhances their ability to perform their unique role (Boulden, Pellegrino, and Gerakios 2019; Lewis 2018, 2019; Moreillon 2016). A district library supervisor is equipped to provide professional development that incorporates:

- clearly defined goals and objectives,
- content and job-embedded activities that meet the needs of building-level school librarians,
- a supportive learning environment with adequate time to practice and immediately apply new skills,
- collaboration with like-minded colleagues, and
- opportunities to evaluate the professional development experience (Brown, Dotson, and Yontz 2011).

Conceptual Framework

Nancy Everhart and Melissa P. Johnston’s (2016) proposed theory of school librarian leadership served as the conceptual framework for this study. School librarian leadership is defined as “the ability to influence and inspire others to meet identified goals or to share an identified vision” (Everhart and Dresang 2007, 2). Five defining concepts serve as the foundation of Everhart and Johnston’s model of leadership by school librarians (see figure 1): resistance, growth, relationships, communication, and confidence. The concepts of relationships, communication, and growth are positioned within a triangle at the core of the model. Each of these three concepts is placed along a side of the triangle to illustrate how the base concept of confidence supports communication and relationships. According to Everhart and Johnston:

If a school librarian exudes confidence, that librarian is more likely to communicate effectively and to establish and nurture successful relationships. Confidence was also associated with risk-taking, an essential component of leadership. Without the foundation of confidence a school librarian will not even attempt to take on leadership roles and it is unlikely that librarians who lack confidence will be able to influence and inspire others as described in the definition of school librarian leadership. (2016, 21)

As shown in figure 1, the remaining concepts of resistance and growth are located on the axis of the model to indicate how leadership by school librarians is either grown or met with resistance through a variety of factors. These factors are related to a school librarian’s education and the culture of the school site in which the school librarian serves. Five propositions describe the relationships among the five concepts listed below.

Proposition 1: Education can provide a leadership skill set to bolster confidence for the growth of school librarian leadership.

Proposition 2: School librarian leadership growth is influenced by school culture.

Proposition 3: Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth.

Proposition 4: School librarian leadership growth requires a specific mindset.

Proposition 5: School librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership patterns and is resistant to forms of leadership that require taking risks. (Everhart and Johnston 2016, 22–24)

The proposed model, concepts, and propositions will be confirmed or tested within the real-world context of this study.

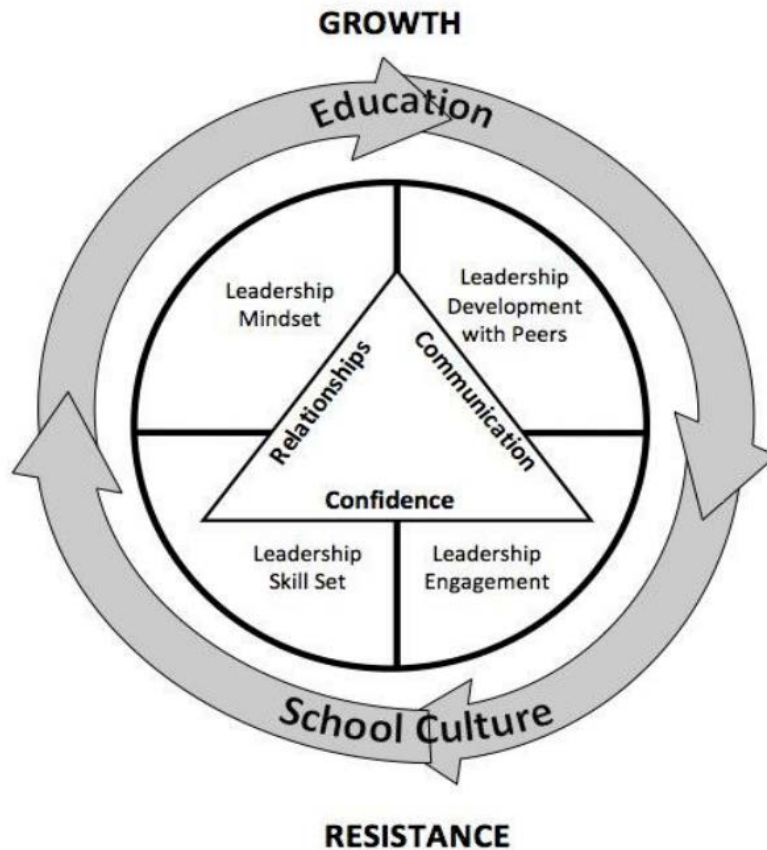


Figure 1. Conceptual model of school librarian leadership (Everhart and Johnston 2016, 19).

Method

GOAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An exploratory case study was employed for this qualitative research. The goal of an exploratory case study is to “develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry” (Yin 2018, 10). In this case, the goal was to explore how school district leaders can foster the development of an effective school library program in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What barriers prevent the development of an effective school library?

2. What types of support do in-service school librarians need to effectively serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies?
3. What types of support do school district leaders need to develop an effective school library in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies?

SETTING

The bounded system for this study was a comprehensive Pre-K–12 public school district in a rural county in the southeastern United States. This district was selected because it does not employ a full-time district-level school library supervisor in an official administrative role. Approximately fifteen thousand students are enrolled across its twelve elementary schools, six middle schools, five high schools, and two college and career academies. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the district opened the 2020–2021 school year with a dual instructional model in which parents and students were given the choice of enrolling in a traditional in-person learning model or a fully virtual model that mirrored the traditional learning model.

The district administration consists of eight distinct departments, two of which are directly related to school libraries: Teaching and Learning, and Technology. The Teaching and Learning department is headed by an assistant superintendent and consists of multiple administrative and support personnel who oversee various aspects of curriculum, instruction, and assessment throughout the district. The responsibility for overseeing the district's population of school librarians rests on the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning. The district provides a forum for its building-level school librarians to meet once a month to engage in collaboration and professional learning. This school librarian consortium (SLC) annually elects a leader to organize the meetings and advocate for school libraries' interests with district leadership. The assistant superintendent of teaching and learning and the chief technology officer regularly attend these meetings.

A letter of permission was obtained from the district prior to securing my university's Institutional Review Board approval to conduct the study.

PARTICIPANTS

Invitations to participate in the study were e-mailed to relevant district-level personnel and building-level school librarians. The district-level personnel consisted of those who held leadership roles in the areas related to the school library: teaching and learning; assessment; professional development; and instructional technology. Four district leaders agreed to participate in the study.

The district employs twenty-three building-level school librarians. Their title is “media specialist.” Twenty-one of these school librarians held professional school librarian certification at the time of data collection and were eligible to participate in the study. Seven school librarians agreed to participate. Their experience as school librarians ranged from two to seven years. One of the school librarian participants held a dual role, that of a building-level school librarian and the leader of the district's SLC.

All participants were notified that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Those that agreed to participate were asked to electronically consent on a research information sheet prior to engaging with the study.

DATA COLLECTION

Overview

Data were collected from interviews with district leaders, focus groups of school librarians, observations of the monthly SLC meetings, and documents generated by the school district. Data were collected between August and November 2020. All data was stored in local password-protected electronic files and a secured room.

Semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions aligned to the study's research questions and existing literature were used for both the interviews and focus group (see appendix).

Process

All participants were provided copies of AASL's "Definition of an Effective School Library" (2018a) and "School Library Evaluation Checklist" (2018d). The purpose of the "School Library Evaluation Checklist" is to assist educators in using the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* to establish an effective school library. This evaluation tool consists of items that enable a school librarian and principal to examine the library space, library program, and learning outcomes at the building level. It also includes a framework to help school leaders identify needs at the district level (AASL 2018c).

Interviews were conducted with the four district leader participants and the one dual-role school librarian participant via a video-conferencing platform. The interviews ranged in length from thirty to sixty minutes.

Two focus groups were held in person. The first group consisted of three school librarian participants and the one dual-role school librarian participant, and the second consisted of three different school librarian participants. The focus group sessions ranged from sixty to ninety minutes in length. All interviews and focus group sessions were recorded via the video-conferencing platform or a voice recorder. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information was either redacted or replaced with pseudonyms.

Four of the district's monthly meetings of school librarians were observed. Two of these meetings were held virtually via a video-conferencing platform, and two were held in person. Field notes were collected during the observations to document how the topics of discussion aligned with the data collected in interviews and focus groups.

Documents were then reviewed to corroborate and augment data collected from the interviews, focus group sessions, and observations. These documents included the district's strategic plan, school librarian job description and corresponding evaluation form, and school board policies and regulations for the school library.

DATA ANALYSIS

An exploratory method of coding was employed to “enable an analysis that directly answers your research questions and goals” (Saldaña 2016, 71). All sources of data were uploaded into the NVivo data analysis software program. A provisional list of codes was developed from the literature on enablers and barriers to school librarian leadership and applied to the interview and focus group transcripts within NVivo. The list of codes was refined throughout Johnny Saldaña’s (2016) First and Second Cycle Coding processes. Pattern Coding was applied during the Second Cycle Coding process to organize the initial codes into categories and themes (see table 1).

The observation field notes and documents were then reviewed to determine alignment to the identified categories. All data appeared to support the findings. No disparities were found nor was a need identified to generate new codes or categories. The themes were then interpreted to develop a naturalistic generalization of the case.

Table 1. Categories and themes.

Categories	Themes
a) Lack of clarity in role definition	I. Ambiguous Expectations
b) Insufficient district-level support	
c) Insufficient staffing	II. Inability to Fully Engage with the Instructional Program
d) Emphasis on testing	
e) Resistant teachers	
f) District-level leadership	III. Relationships
g) Supportive principal	
h) Collaboration with school librarians	
i) Collaboration with teachers	

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Credibility of findings was established through triangulation of multiple sources of information to provide evidence to corroborate the main themes. Member checking was employed to provide participants the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the findings and interpretations. Researcher bias was mitigated by entering notes in a reflective journal during data collection and analysis and by peer review of the final research report. Dependability and confirmability were also established through peer review of the case study database with a research colleague. Transferability was addressed using thick, rich descriptions for the case.

Findings

OVERVIEW

Nine categories were identified from the data, from which three themes emerged (see table 1):

- I. ambiguous expectations,

- II. inability to fully engage with the instructional program, and
- III. relationships.

The categories of a) a lack of clarity in role definition and b) insufficient district-level support theme I: ambiguous expectations. The categories of c) insufficient staffing, d) emphasis on testing, and e) resistant teachers support theme II: inability to fully engage with the instructional program. The categories of f) district-level leadership, g) supportive principal, h) collaboration with school librarians, and i) collaboration with teachers support the theme of “relationships.” Each of these categories and themes will be discussed within the context of the study’s research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: WHAT BARRIERS PREVENT THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LIBRARY?

Introduction

Study participants identified several challenges and limitations that adversely affect their ability to provide instructional leadership in multiple literacies.

Ambiguous Expectations: Lack of Clarity in Role Definition

A lack of clarity in role definition for school librarians serves as the primary barrier to the development of an effective school library. This is largely due to a lack of understanding of the current standards of school librarianship, as described by a school librarian who said:

I feel like they feel like we’re antiquated, in some kind of way. We’re the librarians of old even though we’re not and we know that. Sometimes I feel like [they need to know] I do more than just check books in and out.

This view has been reinforced by school librarians who have continued to model a more-traditional view of the school librarian as just a “keeper of the books” and have resisted adapting to the use of various technologies. Both school librarian and district leader participants acknowledged this as a problem, noting a sharp distinction between those that choose to function as traditional librarians or “media dragons” rather than “true media specialists.”

An increased focus on the use of technology in K–12 schools has contributed to the lack of clarity in role definition. The abrupt shift to models of virtual learning with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 exacerbated this lack of clarity. At the time of this writing, school librarians find themselves expected to function as the “keeper of the technology” and a technical support provider for students enrolled in both in-person and virtual models of instruction. A school librarian explained:

It’s an all-day thing. I was just telling [my colleague], when she got here, just this morning, five kids came back from virtual [program] and needed Chromebooks to get started, and two kids yesterday that were just freshly enrolled, and you know, to get them in the system, take their picture for Infinite Campus, get them logged in, make sure they know how to get in Drive, make sure this little box works for them, they know not to throw it in their book bag. I mean, it’s all of us. That’s not just high school. And it’s a

real added component of detail work that is necessary, but I'm not sure any of us were ready for it, in that regard.

This shift in expectation may be due partly to a misunderstanding of the term "media" in the "media specialist" title. Some district and school leaders appear to believe that a media specialist should focus on managing various technologies. One district leader shared:

Here's seven years later, I'm seeing a lot more media specialists, a lot more of those, the people that are willing to jump in with the technologies and we've released some of the kind of administrative roles to them through, we have over 15,000 Chromebooks in the district right now.

A school librarian reinforced this view by conceding:

It is my principal asking me to do this. And even though he asked me to do a lot, his idea of what I do is, I've got six digital signages. We've got Facebook, we've got the website, we've got just a lot. He's like, you are the media specialist, and he is thinking media as in television and Facebook and social media and things like that. And it is part of it, but it's like they're taking away the actual instructional part.

School librarians reported feeling overwhelmed by the technical support requirements that restrict their ability to serve in an instructional capacity. Additionally, they find themselves in a competitive role with instructional coaches who appear to have been directed to fulfill an instructional role that school librarians are trained for and desire to fulfill. A school librarian lamented:

[Administrators] also have implemented jobs for people called instructional coaches. We have an instructional coach, and she's great, she's wonderful. But I feel like part of the job that she does is part of the job I should be doing.

Another echoed this by stating:

[Administrators are] not adapting themselves to update our role. And see the value in it. They'll look at other people's roles, like the instructional coach - pull them, [tell them,] we're going to teach you, we're going to do this, we're going to do this. Yeah, but they don't do that with us.

In regard to training, school librarians are specifically addressed in two items within the district's strategic improvement plan: to provide training to improve media specialists' support for instructional technology in schools, and to improve media specialists' support of print, digital, and mixed-use literacy. However, the strategic improvement plan and its implementation do not make clear what type of support the school librarians are expected to provide as a result of this training. At the four SLC meetings observed, most of the training provided to school librarians focused on teaching them how to manage or use the administrative aspects of digital accounts such as Clever, Google Admin Console, Infinite Campus, Illuminate, and the school website. The district's technology leader explained that these trainings were beneficial because they enabled the school librarians to help students and teachers with these programs when they had questions. Only one guest speaker provided training on a digital tool that school librarians could use to advance instructional goals in collaboration with classroom teachers.

A school librarian highlighted another potential explanation for the lack of clarity in role definition, especially regarding the increased expectation to manage digital accounts and technology hardware. She remarked:

But also look at your administrators, we've got four, three assistants, and one principal. None of them have the time to become fine-tuned in any of this. So who's next? Do they give it to a guidance person? No. Too much health, wellness, too many classes changing. Not enough guidance counselors. We used to have more, but we have cut them and never brought them back. So, the next person logically that touches every person in school is us. So, I think it in some way by default has come our direction. But I also think, and I don't know how to change this part, I don't think that [administrators] know what we do. And I've talked about it for seven years. I know what I do. And I say it out loud. And I say what I really want to do, and that never happens, and you know it.

Ambiguous Expectations: Insufficient District-Level Support

A lack of sufficient full-time or unified support at the district level serves as a secondary barrier to the development of an effective school library. Though the district's current assistant superintendent of teaching and learning strives to provide support to the school librarians, she acknowledged there was "a complete lack of support and alignment" prior to her assumption of the position in the previous year. One school librarian noted that many other populations within the district such as principals and counselors have direct representation within district administration, but school librarians do not have a "seat at the table" or an official voice to advocate for their needs and interests.

No clear vision or common standard for how school librarians should be utilized to best support students' learning is articulated within the district's instructional plans. This lack is reflected in an outdated job description and an evaluation process that is inconsistently implemented across schools. A school librarian explained:

And I know lots of principals that never meet with a media specialist to formally evaluate them. They just e-mail the media specialists and say, "I'm gonna click that we had a pre-conference and a conference, you just say yes." And then they write [the evaluations], and they go on about their way and they never actually met or set any goals.

District leaders acknowledge that they would like to see their school librarians serve as instructional leaders within their schools but lack the capacity within their current roles to effectively lead librarians in this direction. The building-level school librarian who serves as the leader of the SLC has taken on many responsibilities that should be relegated to someone in an official administrative role. Therefore, she is overwhelmed by attempting to meet the SLC responsibilities in addition to those of her full-time building-level position.

Inability to Fully Engage with the Instructional Program: Insufficient Staffing

The absence of full-time clerical and operational support in the form of a clerk was indicated as a primary barrier to the ability to engage with the school's instructional program. The school librarians agreed that they are severely limited in the types and levels of support they can provide to teachers given that they are restricted to supervising and maintaining the physical library space. The district requires that adult supervision be provided in the school library for the entire

instructional day, so school librarians cannot leave the library unless they close it to students. One school librarian remarked that she had not taken a lunch break in seven years so that she could keep the library open and available to students. Another lamented:

I really wish I had time to push into classrooms to do lessons on how to research, but I'm locked in my circulation desk, because even for a tiny school we serve right over 400 kids. We have our circulation, kindergarten checks out every day, every kid [in] first grade every day, second grade every day. So, we have a very, very high circulation. So, I am locked at my circulation desk. And I have one volunteer who's consistent. On Wednesdays, I have one volunteer. The rest of the week is just kind of doing the best we can. So, if I had a clerk to run circulation, yeah. Then I could push into classrooms and help them whenever they're doing different topics and all this kind of stuff. But I'm literally locked at a circulation desk all day.

A lack of substitutes was also identified as a limitation as some of the school librarians are pulled from the library to serve as substitutes for classroom teachers. In addition, though district's board policy regulation states that a substitute teacher should be supplied to sustain school library services in the absence of a school librarian, either no substitutes are available or a lack of clarity exists about how a substitute would be funded. This circumstance proves to be a barrier to school librarians' ability to take extended time away from the physical library space for illness, professional learning, collaboration with teachers, and co-teaching in classrooms.

The lack of adequate technical support personnel further constrains school librarians. The district currently employs only part-time information technology (IT) support for each school site. Each IT technician's time is split between two schools. Therefore, they are not present at a site for half of each week. During their absence, responsibility for meeting all technical support needs falls on the school librarians. This responsibility increases their clerical and operational workload and again prevents them from leaving the library due to the need to answer frequent calls, e-mails, and face-to-face requests for support.

Inability to Fully Engage with the Instructional Program: Emphasis on Testing

A district-wide emphasis on testing serves as a secondary barrier to school librarians' ability to engage with a school's instructional program, specifically in literacy. School librarians who participated in the study noted that students' reading skills are continually assessed via a standardized computer assessment to generate a measure of each student's Lexile reading level. Many students are then directed to select books only within a range of their assigned Lexile measure. One of the district leaders explained the problem by saying:

At the school, with the increased pressure of high-stakes testing, [the idea] that I'm [the student] going to read a book because I love it, has taken a hit. Because I [the student] have to be in this Lexile range in order to qualify for this performance band. And so I [the teacher] need you to read in this range...And so from our end, as educators, just pleasure reading has taken a toll. And I'll just be honest, and it is because teachers feel that sense of urgency that I [the teacher] have to be in this performance band. And so they've gotten to where...oftentimes we're using a lot of nonfiction articles or nonfiction texts, and we're not even reading full books for the experience of going on that journey with the characters.

A school librarian asserted that it seems that the school library has been assigned the sole responsibility to provide books at a grade level and Lexile level to match the needs of every student in the school. Others find it difficult to suggest books a student may enjoy if they are not “Lexiled” within the student’s predetermined levels. School librarians admitted that not all books are Lexiled. Also, not enough books are available at certain Lexile levels, and the content of higher Lexile-leveled books is often not appropriate for certain developmental levels. Consequently, students’ choices are limited. School librarians believe the classroom curriculum should provide for and emphasize Lexiled reading, while the school library should focus on promoting and encouraging reading for enjoyment and lifelong learning.

Inability to Fully Engage with the Instructional Program: Resistant Teachers

Teacher resistance is closely related to the district-wide emphasis on testing. School librarians reported that they have been told that teachers feel they do not have time to collaborate with other school personnel due to stringent curriculum standards and pacing guides adopted to prepare students to succeed on the annual standardized tests. One school librarian shared that “teachers already ‘don’t have time’ to come to the school library for lessons because they have to use their time for the specific instruction designed by the county.”

Classroom instructional time is structured in a manner that prohibits students from leaving the classroom to visit the library. A school librarian explained:

Because they [classroom teachers] just, they don’t see it as having enough time to do what they’re supposed to do in the classroom at this point. And our [standardized test] scores are not the best. And of course [stakeholders are] after us about that. So it’s kind of like “stay in your classroom” for kids in there.

If school librarians were able to leave the library, this structure also prohibits them from visiting the classroom. Additionally, a transition away from the use of computer labs located with the school library to use of classroom-based devices has discouraged teachers from scheduling instructional time in the library.

School librarians find that collaboration rarely occurs with most classroom teachers due to scheduling difficulties and a lack of teachers’ understanding of the benefits of collaboration. Study participants feel that teachers think collaboration is an addition to their schedule, not a synergistic partnership to improve student achievement.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT DO IN-SERVICE SCHOOL LIBRARIANS NEED TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS IN MULTIPLE LITERACIES?

Introduction

Relationships were found to serve as a primary support for both school librarians and district leaders. These relationships are characterized as being with personnel who enjoy their work, desire to make a positive difference for students and teachers, and value the school librarian’s role.

Relationships: District-Level Leadership

Many of the supports needed by school librarians can be realized through a relationship with a full-time district library supervisor, but the district studied does not have one. School librarians desire to work with a leader who possesses the knowledge and capacity to advocate for the needs and interests of the school library at the administrative level. This leader should be able to set and maintain the vision for how school librarians are effectively used as instructional leaders of multiple literacies within the district's instructional program. He or she would ensure that school board policies and regulations, job descriptions, and evaluation processes for school libraries and librarians are aligned to current professional standards. In addition, the supervisor would drive the process for integrating school librarians into the district's strategic improvement plan within curriculum and instruction, literacy, and technology initiatives. The supervisor could set common standards to be implemented across schools, such as adopting a research model and purchasing and sharing e-books. Finally, the supervisor would lead the monthly SLC meetings and provide training and support to new school librarians and administrators.

School librarians who participated in the study expressed the desire to grow in their instructional roles so that they can positively impact student achievement. A district library supervisor could help school librarians set annual improvement goals and partner with school site administrators in evaluating librarians. Regarding the emphasis on literacy, a district library supervisor could advocate for school libraries to focus on developing recreational readers and lifelong learners by allowing students to independently select reading material. This leader could work to protect the library from serving as a reading room for a standardized testing program.

School librarians in the study expressed desire to engage with professional learning that focuses on developing expertise in multiple literacies, as described by one school librarian who said:

I kind of wish they put more trainings [for times when a district leader] would come and talk to us about digital literacy, how we can push that out to kids because I'm not gonna lie, I'm not very strong in that. I know reading and I know some things, but I don't know much about it as I need to. I would love somebody to come in and be more in depth.

A district library supervisor could provide school librarian-specific professional learning during SLC meetings and dedicated professional development days. The supervisor could advocate for school librarians to have adequate funding to procure substitutes and attend state and national workshops and conferences focused on school librarianship and the multiple literacies.

A district library supervisor would be able to advocate for the hiring of library clerks and additional technical support personnel. Hiring clerks and other support personnel would free school librarians from the constraints of clerical and operational tasks to engage with the instructional program via collaboration, co-teaching, and co-assessment. A school librarian pointed out that the hiring of clerks would be a wise financial investment:

...cost-effective-wise, would it be less expensive on the [district] to provide a clerk, even a half day, as opposed to putting in an instructional coach? You know, that money-wise, there's got to be some kind of give and take there so that we can go back to what our jobs were built upon.

The supervisor could advocate for school librarians to receive additional paid time prior to and following each school year to take care of the administrative tasks required by the management

of the physical library, instructional materials, and technology resources. The supervisor could work with site principals to ensure that each school library received equitable funding.

Finally, a full-time district library supervisor could promote school librarians' value so that they are treated equitably with other populations within the district. Two school librarians explained the need for this, with the first declaring:

[My principal] put it the best way - she said they should look at the media center like they look at principals. If you have a school with 400 people, okay, you get a principal and one assistant. If you know, if you've got 1000 like, we...we've got a principal and two [assistants], you know, so it should be the same thing with a media clerk.

The second shared:

The counselors meet every month, and they're on the main docket that's sent out by the [district], but the media specialist group is not. And the nurses are on the docket that the nurses are meeting on this day, at this location, and the media specialists are not. And so why is that? I don't care that people aren't coming to the meeting. But I care that we should be on the docket, because that shows importance to me. But it's important enough to show that the media specialists are meeting on this day.

Relationships: Supportive Principal

Feeling valued and supported by the school site principal ranks as a primary support for school librarians. School librarians need a principal who hires school librarians according to current professional standards and holds them accountable to the district-approved school librarian evaluation instrument. School librarians desire one that spends time engaging with the school library, supports and encourages collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers, and protects the physical library space from being closed for non-instructional events. School librarians who participated in this study emphasized that they need principals to value and promote them as instructional leaders and protect their time to serve in such a manner. They indicated this cannot happen if the principal continually pulls them to serve as substitutes or teachers of virtual or credit-recovery classes, or requires them to take on time-consuming responsibilities such as organizing school events or administering standardized tests. School librarians also need their principals to include them on site leadership teams and in the development of the annual school improvement plan so they can fully integrate the school library into the school's instructional program.

Relationships: Collaboration with School Librarians

The school librarians who participated in the study greatly appreciate that the district allows them to engage with one another during their monthly SLC meetings. They wish to continue these meetings but want more time to collaborate rather than sit through training sessions. They would like to spend time in grade-level ranges to talk about how to best meet their student populations' needs. They would also like to collaborate with school librarians in other school districts and states through attendance at workshops and conferences.

Relationships: Collaboration with Teachers

School librarians need time to collaborate with teachers during the school day, collaborative planning days, and professional learning days. School librarians need administrators to include them in planning processes for new curriculum, content, or extended reading books, whether that occurs during the traditional school year or the summer break. They also want to engage with professional learning focused on how to support the instructional program more fully through collaborative relationships. A school librarian who participated in the study highlighted this by stating:

I would love to see too, more training about how we can help in the classroom...ways that we can take what we have, how we can integrate it with teachers. Yes, the technology component is fantastic, we do need that, we always are going to need that, new things that are coming out—new programs, new apps, whatever, we do need that. But I really would love to see some more of like how to really work within the classroom and how students can really use it and how we can mesh it with what they're already doing. So that we're not giving teachers extra—it is helpful to what they're already doing. I feel like that definitely needs to happen.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT DO SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS NEED TO DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LIBRARY IN WHICH SCHOOL LIBRARIANS SERVE AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS IN MULTIPLE LITERACIES?

Relationships: District-Level Leadership

District leaders also indicated a need for a full-time school library supervisor. They are simply too constrained by their current responsibilities to provide the level of leadership needed by school librarians. One district leader clearly stated what is needed:

Another human body. I am just being completely honest, what I am charged to do and the role that I have, it would be next to impossible to then add the hat of the supervision, especially to the level that we just looked at [in the AASL documents given to each study participant]. There's not enough time for me to do all of those things—that continuation of that ed tech support and meeting with them and providing professional learning that they request, yes, but the direct supervision, monitoring, providing supports, and just saying, I am here to help build strong media programs and help them find their place and niche in the school. I don't [have the time]. And I'm being honest, it's not possible with my current role.

District leaders acknowledge that it would be helpful to have a fellow leader who could advise them about how school librarians could fit into the full instructional program and support multiple literacies for an entire school.

Relationships: Collaboration with School Librarians

District leaders admitted that they do not fully understand the role of the modern school librarian. One leader communicated a potential solution:

I think maybe some, some clear expectations about they need to be in charge of and responsible for.

District leaders also shared that it would be beneficial for themselves and other school librarians to observe and interact with exemplary school librarians whose practices reflect the current standards of the field. One of the leaders noted:

I think if they have examples from surrounding [districts] like [neighboring district], if they can see what they're offering and what they're doing, and how that's helping the media specialist help the students [and] help...our school. It's not just for us. At the end of the day, it's not about me; it's about what is best for our school and our children.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how school district leaders can foster the development of an effective school library in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies. The effective school library is adequately staffed with a state-certified school librarian, has current digital and print resources and technology, and provides regular professional development and collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians (AASL 2018a). Results revealed two main barriers that inhibit the development of an effective school library: a) ambiguous administrative expectations for school librarians, and b) school librarians' limited participation in the K–12 instructional program. Conversely, results demonstrated that positive relationships serve as significant supports for enabling school librarians to function as instructional leaders of multiple literacies.

The barriers that currently prevent the school librarians in this study from serving as instructional leaders in multiple literacies confirm those found in the existing literature. These barriers include a lack of clarity in role definition, insufficient district-level support, insufficient staffing, a district-wide emphasis on testing, and resistant teachers (Calvert 2016; Elkins 2018; Johnston 2012; Hughes-Hassell and Hanson-Baldauf 2008; Lewis 2018, 2019; Merga 2020).

The influx of technologies into K–12 instructional programs in the form of hardware devices and digital programs has compounded the lack of clarity in role definition for school librarians. As the responsibilities for providing technical support for these technologies has fallen on school librarians, their ability to serve as instructional leaders has decreased. School personnel have come to view the school librarian as a technical support provider and manager of digital accounts rather than as a fellow educator who can assist them with integrating these technologies into the existing curriculum to positively impact student achievement. One of the district leaders in this study exclaimed:

I love the idea of being intentional and trying to make the media specialist become more of an instructional leader for their school. And I think that's the perfect fit for it, especially with instructional technology.

However, there appears to be a disconnect between the district's strategic plan and school leaders' views of how school librarians should utilize technology. One of the initiatives in the district's strategic improvement plan states that technology: is used to reinforce higher-order reasoning and differentiation, and is integrated into curriculum design, development, implementation, and evaluation. The plan also states that students' use of technology should be emphasized within their ongoing learning process. This initiative appears to focus on integrating

technology into the curriculum to achieve student learning outcomes that address the higher-level cognitive aspects of literacy. However, the school librarians currently have little to no opportunity to address this initiative. They are instead relegated to dealing with the lower-level technical aspects of literacy, namely, how to access and functionally use resources outside the context of the curriculum.

Most of the discussion in the interviews and focus groups with district leaders and school librarians focused on aspects of literacy and digital literacy: specifically the need to motivate students to become lifelong learners through reading and the need to provide access to technology. Very little discussion focused on information literacy, media literacy, or visual literacy. It was not clear if this lack of discussion was due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of these literacies or because the school librarians have few opportunities to collaborate with teachers to co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess units of instruction that address these literacies within the existing curriculum.

Implications

PRACTICAL

The results of this study have outlined specific supports needed for both district leaders and school librarians to develop effective school libraries in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders of multiple literacies.

First, a clear vision for how school librarians should be used at each school site within the school district must be established. Given available resources, a decision must be made to determine how the school librarian can best positively impact student achievement. School librarians without sufficient clerical, operational, and technical support staff will likely be able only to facilitate the daily circulation and technical duties required within the physical library space. These librarians will be restricted to serving solely as a manager of physical and digital resources. To serve as an instructional leader, the school librarian will need full-time support staff. Having support staff would allow the librarian to focus on collaborating with classroom teachers, engaging with the instructional program, and interacting with students within a classroom environment.

Once the vision for school librarians has been established, clear expectations must be set to align with this vision. The district's board policies and associated regulations for the school library as well as the job description and evaluation procedure for school librarians should be revised and aligned to the current professional standards of school librarianship established by AASL. Additionally, both the district and school site improvement plans should clearly describe how school librarians will be expected to impact student achievement through literacy, technology, and curriculum and instruction initiatives. These documents should be reviewed annually and revised as needed.

Caution should be exercised when consulting state-level documentation on school libraries. A lack of leadership at the state level appears to contribute to a district's ability to effectively guide its school librarians. In this study, it was found that the state-level education rule to which the district's board policy was aligned had not been updated since 1998. The district's board policy also referenced a state-level school library handbook that has not been available for many years.

When consulted about the out-of-date documents, the state education department's leader of school libraries stated that her school library role consists of only one third of her official duties. Therefore, she is limited in her capacity to make changes in a timely manner. Before her appointment in fall 2020, no one had been employed in this role for several years.

A district library supervisor who possesses the appropriate certification and experience is needed to provide direction and support to district leaders, school site leaders, and school librarians. If a district cannot afford to employ a full-time supervisor, a part-time leader should be considered. A reduction in a building-level school librarian's site responsibilities and a provision of release time, through the addition of full-time support personnel at his or her site library, would enable this leader to tend to both the district-level and building-level needs of the district's school librarian population.

Finally, school librarians need their school districts to provide ongoing professional learning that is tailored to their specific, unique role. School library-specific professional learning opportunities can be located through state and national professional organizations, school librarian preparation programs at local universities, and school library consultants. Professional development should focus on how school librarians can advance multiple literacies to impact student achievement within the instructional program. Within this context, librarians should be given regular opportunities to collaborate with one another and with classroom teachers.

THEORETICAL

This study's findings support propositions two and three of Everhart and Johnston's proposed school librarian leadership theory model (see figure 1):

Proposition 2: School librarian leadership growth is influenced by school culture.

Proposition 3: Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth.

For proposition 2, findings indicate that a lack of vision, lack of clear expectations, and inadequate staffing inhibited school librarians' growth as leaders. Supporting proposition 3, the findings of this study showed that peers contributed to the growth of school librarians' leadership. The school librarians in this study highly valued their SLC meetings during which they could collaborate with one another to grow their knowledge and skill base.

The findings of this study test proposition 5: School librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership. All participants expressed a desire for school librarians to serve as instructional leaders. There did not appear to be resistance to the idea of librarians as instructional leaders or to a need to take risks to engage in leadership tasks. Instead, a lack of clarity in role definition, insufficient staffing, and an emphasis on testing served as barriers to leadership.

The significance of relationships was clearly a main theme to emerge from this study and reflects one of the core concepts of Everhart and Johnston's model. The findings of this study extend this concept by demonstrating that relationships are an essential foundation for influencing communication and confidence. Positive relationships with supportive principals, a district library supervisor, colleagues, and support staff are needed to enable a school librarian to serve in a leadership role.

Overall, this study's findings demonstrate that clear expectations and adequate resources must be in place for school librarians to effectively serve in a leadership capacity. Clear expectations might be added to the core of the triangle in the school librarian leadership theory model as a foundational concept needed to advance leadership by school librarians. A frame might also be added around the entire model to communicate how the level of resources available to school librarians and other educators at a school can influence resistance and growth.

Limitations

The results of this study are not generalizable beyond the participants in this study due to factors relating to participant availability, experience, and bias.

The implementation of the study was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns that were initiated in March 2020. Many school librarians in the district may have been unable to find the time to participate in the study because of their increased responsibilities during the pandemic. The abrupt transition to a fully virtual model of instruction in March 2020 and the dual instructional model that was instituted in August 2020 placed many new demands on librarians in the district. The low (33 percent) participation rate may have been a result.

The school librarians who did agree to participate shared that they tended to be among the most vocal ones in the district's SLC and those most interested in serving as instructional leaders. One district leader holding a significant role related to the school library did not respond to requests to participate.

I serve on the faculty of a school librarian preparation program through which many of the participants earned their school librarian certification. Therefore, both the researcher and the participants were motivated to bring about positive changes to the district's school library program. As a participant-observer during the SLCs, I responded to questions and provided input on various topics when requested. The data collection methods served as catalysts between the district leaders and school librarians to begin enacting changes throughout the data collection period. This motivation and start of enacting changes may have impacted how participants addressed interview questions and comported themselves during SLC meetings.

Areas for Further Investigation

Several recommendations for future research can be derived from this exploratory study. First, this study could be repeated post-pandemic to provide researchers with an opportunity to fully explore the pandemic-influenced changes on the role of the school librarian, perhaps with a greater population of participants. In addition, this study could be conducted as a multiple case study to compare experiences across school districts. Second, a work sampling study could be conducted to more closely examine how school librarians are spending their time. Are they spending most of their time engaging with the instructional program or managing physical and digital resources? Third, an analysis of school library standards could also be conducted to determine:

- the degree to which school librarians are expected to provide leadership in each of the multiple literacies,

- how expectations have changed regarding the need to provide support for digital resources, and
- if current expectations are realistic given recurring staffing and funding constraints.

Finally, a professional development program to educate district leadership about the expectations of the modern school librarian could be established and examined to determine how it impacts the development of an effective school library within participants' school districts.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: DISTRICT LEADERS

1. Tell me about yourself. Why did you decide to pursue a career in education?
2. Tell me about your career path.
 - Education/degrees (location/dates)
 - Certifications
 - Prior teaching experience
 - Prior positions
3. Describe your current role:
 - Title
 - Location: Department or division
 - Composition of professional and support staff
 - Length of time in current position
 - Primary responsibilities
 - How you remain current in your area of specialization
 - With what local, state, national, and/or international professional organizations do you regularly engage?
4. Tell me about your experience in working with school librarians and the school library program in your current role.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) is the professional organization that sets the standards for the school library field. According to AASL, school librarians are expected to serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies, which have been identified as literacy (reading), information literacy, media literacy, technical (digital) literacy, and visual literacy.

5. What are your greatest instructional concerns regarding each of the following literacies?
 - Literacy (Reading)
 - Information Literacy
 - Media Literacy
 - Technical (Digital) Literacy
 - Visual Literacy
6. What are the school district's expectations for school librarians in providing instructional leadership in multiple literacies?
 - Upon what foundation(s) are these expectations based?

- Standards?
 - Professional resources?
 - Research?
 - How are these expectations communicated to school district personnel?
7. Let's review the American Association of School Librarians' [Definition of an Effective School Library](#) and [School Library Evaluation Checklist](#).
 - Please describe your level of participation with the **District-Level** elements outlined on the School Library Evaluation Checklist.
 8. What do you need to be able to develop an effective school library program in which school librarians serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies?
 - Knowledge and skills (i.e., research, professional learning, mentoring)
 - Resources (i.e., time, staffing, tools, policies & procedures, sample documents)
 9. Please share your thoughts on anything else related to this topic.
 10. If I have any additional questions, may I contact you in person, by phone, or email?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

1. What do you enjoy about being a school librarian?
2. Tell me about your career path:
 - Education/degrees/certifications (location/dates)
 - Number of years and grade levels served as a school librarian
 - Prior teaching experience
3. How has school librarianship changed throughout your career as a school librarian?
 - Response to pandemic/virtual learning

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) is the professional organization that sets the standards for the school library field. According to AASL, school librarians are expected to serve as instructional leaders in multiple literacies, which have been identified as literacy (reading), information literacy, media literacy, technical (digital) literacy, and visual literacy.

4. How do you stay current in the following areas?
 - School librarianship (research, standards, policies, trends, issues)
 - Literacy (Reading)
 - Information Literacy
 - Media Literacy

- Technical (Digital) Literacy
 - Visual Literacy
 - With what local, state, national, and/or international professional organizations do you regularly engage?
5. What are the school district's expectations for school librarians for providing instructional leadership in multiple literacies?
- Upon what foundation(s) are these expectations based?
 - Standards?
 - Professional resources?
 - Research?
 - How are these expectations communicated to you?
 - In what ways are you supported in these expectations?
 - In what ways are you held accountable to these expectations?
6. What do you need to be able to effectively provide ongoing instructional leadership in multiple literacies?
- Knowledge and skills (i.e., research, professional learning, mentoring)
 - Resources (i.e., time, staffing, tools, policies & procedures, sample documents)
7. As we conclude, I'm going to ask you to review the American Association of School Librarians' [Definition of an Effective School Library](#) and [School Library Evaluation Checklist](#). I will send you a form upon which you may describe enablers and barriers to your ability to successfully achieve the **Building-Level** elements outlined on the School Library Evaluation Checklist within your current role.
8. Please share your thoughts on anything else related to this topic.
9. If I have any additional questions, may I contact you in person, by phone, or email?

Cite This Article

Lewis, Melanie A. 2021. "Enabling School Librarians to Serve as Instructional Leaders of Multiple Literacies." *School Library Research* 24.
<www.ala.org/aasl/slr/volume24/lewis>.



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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