A certified school librarian is a professional learning powerhouse

BY MELANIE A. LEWIS AND KATIE McNAMARA

School administrators often seek out personnel to facilitate embedded professional learning, usually by asking a skilled classroom teacher to serve as an instructional coach, curriculum specialist, or teacher on special assignment. One source administrators do not often consider is a certified school librarian, but these professionals are ready resources for professional learning in improving student literacy, integrating technology into the curriculum, and other areas.

"School librarian" is frequently used as a catch-all term for any individual who works in a library space, but a state-certified school librarian (also known as a library media specialist or teacher librarian) is an educator who has completed a master's level certification program in school librarianship and successfully obtained the appropriate state-level school librarian certification.

Certification requirements vary by state, and some states require that

school librarians hold both teacher certification and school librarian certification (Jesseman et al., 2015). In contrast, paraprofessionals generally serve as technical and clerical support staff in school libraries and hold titles such as library assistant, library technician, or library clerk (AASL, 2019a, 2019b).

Many educators may assume that school librarians serve only as managers of the school library facility. On the contrary, certified school librarians are trained to serve in four distinct roles in addition to that of a school library program administrator: information specialist, leader, instructional partner, and teacher (AASL, 2018).

One key expectation that cuts across these roles is that the certified school librarian "deliver professional development designed to meet the diverse needs of all members of the learning community" (AASL, 2019a, p. 14) and lead "professional learning to cultivate broader understanding of the skills that comprise success in a digital age" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2020, p. 1).

Besides school administrators, certified school librarians are among the only faculty members tasked with serving all students and staff. Many school librarians develop a deep knowledge and understanding of each level and subject of the school's curriculum and content-area standards. In addition, since they are often voracious readers, they typically bring a love for learning and sharing knowledge as well as expertise that can equip teachers and other school personnel to meet students' needs.

The primary vehicle for school librarians to take an active role in professional learning is collaboration with classroom teachers. Many school librarians actively and regularly seek out opportunities to co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess lessons and units of instruction, within which they can integrate multiple literacies and a variety of diverse resources.

They use tools such as videoconferencing, email, messaging, and cloud-based office suites to facilitate this in face-to-face and virtual learning environments. This collaboration, when intentional and well-implemented, results in a synergy in which the participating educators develop new competencies and learn how to successfully use new resources within the context of the curriculum over a sustained period.

POTENTIAL FOR PERSONALIZED LEARNING

One of the main benefits of engaging school librarians as professional learning leaders is their ability to personalize the learning to teachers' (or other staff members') needs. But because most teachers and school leaders are not in the habit of partnering with librarians in this way, finding an opening for collaboration is the first step.

A school librarian who obtained certification via a program aligned to the ALA/AASL/CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards (2019a) is equipped to bring the following benefits to the professional development table at K-12 schools:

- Expertise in multiple literacies: literacy (reading), information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy;

- Expertise in digital citizenship;

- Familiarity with the school's mission and instructional goals;

- Knowledge of the resources available via the school library, local public and academic libraries, community organizations, open educational resources (OERs), and subscription-based digital content;

- Knowledge of the legal and ethical guidelines for sharing information and copyright laws pertaining to the use of print and digital content;

- Ability to investigate, select, curate, organize, and recommend print and digital learning resources and assistive technologies to meet specific instructional needs; and

- Ability to facilitate instruction in both face-to-face and virtual learning environments.

A SCHOOL LIBRARIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

ON SUPPORTING TEACHERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

The abrupt shift to virtual learning in mid-2020 caught many teachers off-guard. Suddenly, teachers who had little to no experience with videoconferencing and learning management systems were forced to engage with students through new platforms. This understandably generated a great amount of anxiety.

As a teacher librarian, I (Katie McNamara) always make an effort to stay current in instructional technology trends. When COVID-19 took hold, I made sure to familiarize myself with the new platforms our school was using and made a plan to help prepare my teacher colleagues. I chose to work with them in small groups, in which they learned how to navigate the platforms, deliver instruction virtually, and integrate the platform with the existing curriculum. I personalized each session for each group and the subject matter they taught (e.g. math or English).

I found that these small-group learning experiences reduced teachers' anxiety by providing a safe place to try out the new platform, ask questions, and receive instant feedback. It was particularly helpful for teachers to be learning from a colleague with whom they had an ongoing relationship and daily access.

They have been able to ask follow-up questions whenever they needed, whether it was the day, week, or month after a session. One such follow-up request spurred me to create a series of asynchronous tutorials on how to use closed captioning with Zoom.

This can be an informal connection with one or more teachers. One effective strategy is asking the simple question, "What is something you are worried about teaching?" This often sparks a conversation and opens the door to collaboration and engaging the teacher in personalized professional learning.

For example, Katie McNamara, a teacher librarian in the Kern High School District in Bakersfield, California, and co-author of this article, talked with an English teacher colleague who expressed frustration that her students were resistant to exploring multiple sources.

Her students were required to write an expository essay on an assigned topic, and she was concerned that they weren't developing a true understanding of the subject because they would open the first result from a Google search and simply copy much of what they found. McNamara's immediate response to her was, "Can I try something?" The teacher relaxed upon hearing the offer of help.

McNamara began by asking, "What are the students interested in?" and learned that the most popular topic was The Fair Pay to Play Act, a California statute that would allow college student athletes to be paid. To encourage students to seek out answers from reputable sources, she created a text set of multiple resources focused on the topic. These resources consisted of articles, graphs, photos, and social media posts that reflected a variety of perspectives and varying levels of length and readability.

On the day of the lesson, McNamara and the teacher set out large sheets of paper, each of which had one of the sources glued to it, and some markers on the classroom tables. Students visited each sheet of paper, reviewed the source, and generated questions about points that needed clarification or areas in which they wanted more information.

During a debrief of the activity, students said that they had learned about the differences between sources and the value of reading multiple sources. At the end of the lesson, she debriefed with the students. She asked them what they thought of the activity, if they enjoyed the activity, and if this helped them understand the topic. One student said that she learned she needed to review at least three sources to find out the truth.

Following the lesson, McNamara debriefed with the teacher, who expressed her gratitude and said that she appreciated seeing how McNamara implemented the lesson in a simple yet successful way so that her students not only learned the concept but also enjoyed their work. To help the teacher apply the learning and continue developing throughout the year, the pair discussed how to modify the task in the future and how to apply follow-up activities.

When co-author Melanie Lewis was a high school library media specialist, her administrator directed her to collaborate with each grade level to design interdisciplinary research projects. Over an eight-year period, she collaborated with teachers of English, history, math, science, computer science, and special education to co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess large-scale units of instruction.

Each teacher benefitted from examining the requirements of each subject area and identifying points of connection. As Lewis taught lessons within these units on how to access, evaluate, and use multiple formats of information, the collaborative teaching partners grew in their knowledge of how to integrate these concepts into their own curriculum. They also developed valuable literacy skills that they were able to apply to their personal and professional pursuits.

Years after Lewis and many of the teachers moved on from that school, Lewis was at a local event when she bumped into a teacher who had not been an enthusiastic participant in the interdisciplinary units. However, after having time to reflect, he told her that he finally appreciated all that he

had learned through the experience — especially that she had introduced him and his students to cutting-edge technologies.

Today, Lewis teaches school librarian candidates how to design these types of collaborative interdisciplinary research projects. Her students often comment that, although finding time to collaborate can be challenging, they find that they learn many new things from their instructional partners and vice versa. The synergy that develops within the instructional team is a win-win situation. The teachers grow in knowledge and skill and are thus able to deliver more relevant and rigorous learning experiences for their students. (See sidebar on p. 54.)

PAVING THE WAY FOR LIBRARIANS AS LEADERS

We recommend that all schools harness the potential of certified school librarians to lead professional learning. School and district leaders should provide structure and support to maximize this potential.

To do so, they should enable librarians to prioritize collaboration and teaching over program administration and clerical/operational tasks. Leaders should also encourage librarians to regularly cultivate their own professional learning to stay current in school librarianship, instructional technology, curricular changes, and media literacy.

It is also important for leaders to integrate librarians into the daily operations and professional learning of the faculty. They can include librarians and welcome them to contribute expertise on school site leadership teams, literacy and technology committees, and professional learning communities.

Leaders can encourage classroom teachers to express their professional learning needs and collaborate with their certified school librarians to meet them. In addition, everyone can benefit from librarians having opportunities to observe other staff and be observed themselves, lead a project or initiative, and reflect and debrief as part of collaborative teams.

Certified school librarians are in a unique position to offer learning and growth experiences to teachers, as their expertise reflects that of technology coaches, literacy coaches, curriculum and subject specialists, and more. Looking at teacher and student needs through all these lenses can result in professional learning that helps teachers make the most of every day and every resource.

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