



“If you are not using an inquiry-based research process, start now.”

The School Librarian and Leadership

What Can Be Learned?

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“Lead the way!” This phrase has been used a thousand times, but how does it relate to the work of teacher librarians?

Consider this guideline from AASL (2009): “The school library program is built by professionals who model leadership and best practice for the school community” (p. 45). How can leadership be modeled, and what should be the focus for best practices? I have to admit I am a leadership and school library research geek. That said, there are lessons to be learned from research on leadership and school libraries that can help navigate the unique opportunity before us to ensure a place at the center of teaching and learning. We hold in our hands great possibilities; the question is, What will we do with them? Exciting research, brilliant minds, and amazing practitioners surround us. What can school librarians learn from them to elevate library positions in schools, ensure deep student learning, and keep school libraries at the forefront of teaching and learning?

CONSIDER WHAT MATTERS TO YOU AS A SCHOOL LIBRARIAN AND WHY

This quote from the legendary educator Meier (2002), resonates with me: “All children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world” (p. 4). Although Meier wrote these words years ago, they still ring true because our children should be thinkers, questioners, researchers, inquirers, innovators, and creators. As I consider this and its importance at this juncture in our profession, a point where librarians can be instrumental in promoting a more student-centered learning culture, there are practices that catapult teacher librarians to the center of teaching and learning. These practices are reflected

in our leadership roles in coteaching, knowledge creation, curation, reading advocacy, intellectual freedom, inquiry, and information access.

Being a leader means knowing what matters to you and why. Simon Sinek, author of *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2009), said it well: “People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe.”

Every year I reread the AASL “Common Beliefs” (2007). If you have not read them lately, they are available free online. They guide my practice and remind me why I do what I do. These beliefs provide the guiding principles for a school library program that fosters the ideals envisioned by Meier.

KNOW THE RESEARCH AND HOW IT INFORMS YOUR PRACTICE

Occasionally I find myself speaking with faculty and principals about the importance of collaborating and coteaching. It is imperative that you, the librarian, share and act on research that informs your practice. I rely on recent research

that defines library best practices and resonates with teachers and administrators.

For instance, Loertscher's (2014) research presented in *Teacher Librarian* is a game changer for our students. He provides compelling evidence that when classroom teachers coteach with the librarian, "the number of students who met or exceeded the teacher's highest expectations for a learning experience increased from 32–59% to 70–100%" (p. 10). These are phenomenal statistics that support your role as a coteacher.

After sharing this research, what's next? Start by coteaching with one teacher. Some teachers truly embrace side-by-side coteaching. Often you will need to plan and define the specific roles with the teacher, starting small and building to a more collaborative role. If you are already coteaching, challenge yourself to include more teachers.

As you coteach, document student learning along the way. Two of the easiest ways are to take pictures of the process and conduct pre- and post-student reflections by using your cell phone. Pictures and reflections are powerful ways to highlight the students' learning journeys. Consider how coteaching changes the learning outcome.

Todd's (2013) research highlighted in "The Power of (in) the (Im)possible" in *Teacher Librarian* is now a yearly must-read for me. Todd collected responses from librarians, teachers, administrators, and students. He identified seven core ideas that he labeled "The Principles of the Possible" (p. 10). Several principles are centered on the concept that librarians are predominantly teachers whose practices are collaborative and inquiry based yet

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focused on an articulated curriculum.

After sharing this research, what's next? Determine how you can collaborate and coteach while focusing on your school's standards and curriculum. Know the AASL *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (2007), as well as, the curriculum standards that you support.

If you are not using an inquiry-based research process, start now. The inquiry-based process that our district uses is the Guided Inquiry Design process (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2012). Find one teacher who is willing to try this approach. Often another learning specialist will be an eager collaborator and can help build momentum. Consider how the use of an inquiry-based process differs from traditional reporting research. Document the differences in teaching and student learning you observe.

It is critical that research be continually reviewed from resources within and outside the library world. I highly recommend subscribing to school library periodicals that include research-based articles. This literature overview will provide important insights and help align your practice to support teaching and learning.

CONNECT WITH YOUR PRINCIPAL—PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

Again, being a leader means knowing what matters to you and why. In ad-

dition, you must know what matters to your principal and why. Where do you see similarities to build on? What strengths do you bring to the table? Speaking of strengths, consider what yours are and develop them.

The late Donald Clifton (as cited in Rath & Conchie, 2009) who studied leadership for decades, made this statement in 2003 interview: "What great leaders have in common is that each truly knows his or her strengths—can call on the right strength at the right time. This explains why there is no definitive list of characteristics that describes all leaders" (p. 16). I suggest reading *Strengths Based Leadership* (Rath & Conchie, 2009), as it will provide you with an in-depth look at personal strengths and ideas for developing them.

Does one of the school goals in your district relate to reading, technology, and/or writing? Determine which of your strengths support these areas; convey them to your principal and use them to establish rapport.

Learn to listen to the principal and ask the right questions. Sometimes listening is enough, but often following the listening with "How can I help with . . . ?" or "What can I do to support . . . ?" makes all the difference and opens the door to conversation.

Determine what keeps the principal up at night. Keeping your finger on the school's pulse can help you. Bullying, low test scores, poverty, whatever it is,

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you have access to resources that might help. Find articles, videos, or research studies that relate to the concern and share them. Choose carefully; don't deluge the principal—he/she is busy. Curate the resources in an easily accessible way. You are, after all, all about matching people with great resources. For most librarians, ferreting out just the right resources is a strength!

What matters to the principal and how can you align your practice accordingly? Read what your principal reads. You may be surprised what you can learn and how it can open casual dialogue. For example, the September 2015 issue of *Educational Leadership*, focusing on questioning, is full of amazing articles appropriate for teacher librarians who champion inquiry. I emailed the titles of several of the questioning articles to administrators in my district. This email has opened countless conversations about inquiry and the power of students creating their own questions. These dialogues about inquiry have also provided me with the perfect forum to share research and articles from our professional literature about inquiry and the role of teacher librarians.

Don't go to your principal with problems—always come with solutions. Years ago, I went to my supervisor with a problem for which I could not find an easy solution, but I presented the problem and one possible solution. My “solution” opened a discussion that eventually led to a mutually agreeable and much better solu-

tion. My supervisor later shared with me that she loved it when I came to her with a problem, a possible solution, and the openness to work out a better solution together. She said she appreciated that I did not complain and that I was open to her thoughts. Since then, I have always presented solutions along with my problems, knowing it will be appreciated.

HIGHLIGHT YOUR PRACTICE

How do you share the highlights of your program? What and when do you share? Start with collecting evidence of student learning.

I already suggested the power of a camera, which Valenza (2015) takes to the next level in her article “Evolving With Evidence” in *Knowledge Quest*. Valenza outlines a myriad of quick and easy ways to collect data. Her list of data collection strategies ranges from using paper or online tools such as exit slips to more in-depth survey tools. Recently, I used the online tool Padlet (suggested by Valenza) with principals to gather their take-aways from discussions about blended learning. Valenza (2015) shares great prompts that can help you determine student understanding and inform your teaching. These documentations of student learning are perfect evidence of learning in the library.

Documenting evidence of learning on a regular basis serves as an important communication and advocacy tool. Snapshots of your program in regular

intervals are best. One easy, systematic way to share your highlights is to align your reporting with your school's grading periods. Each 9 weeks the librarians in our district use their data as a vehicle to share their successes with principals.

The phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” is critical when reporting data. Tell your library program story using pictures. Be creative and concise. Principals—and everyone else, for that matter—love pictures, charts, photos, short anecdotes, infographics, videos, comic strips, and graphs. While collecting checkout statistics can certainly prove that the library is busy, go deeper; focus on your impact on student learning and teaching. Data can possibly include

- Examples of activities you implemented that supported reading or writing.
- Examples of coteaching experiences using *AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* in conjunction with curriculum standards. Display one formative assessment tool and evidence of student success.
- Examples of leadership activities you engaged in with your staff, promoting teaching and learning.
- Examples of technology use within a lesson with students. Show evidence of learning.
- Examples of several phases of a guided inquiry unit. Show student reflections and evidence of student success.

End the school year with an annual report, a quick year-in-review. In this instance, it is imperative to present the annual report to your principal in a formal, in-person meeting. This forum will allow you to present the report

with your goals for next year. Make the goals doable, and make them matter. Have specific actions in mind when you present each goal. A good place to find incredible examples for annual reports is the *Adventures of Library Girl* blog (<http://www.librarygirl.net/2013/05/school-library-annual-reports.html>). Let your annual report be your road-map for the coming year.

Teacher librarians have important work to do to ensure our place at the center of teaching and learning. The possibility to reinvent our practice—to make it more relevant now and in the future—resides within each of us as leaders. Imagine the possibilities that lie ahead! Lead on!

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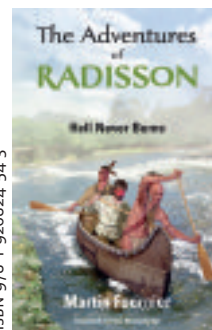
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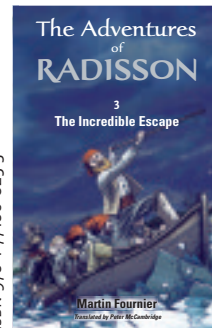
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