School Library Media Specialist-Teacher Collaboration: Characteristics, Challenges, Opportunities

By O. P. Cooper and Marty Bray

Abstract

The most successful school library media specialists are those who collaborate with teachers as full partners in the instructional process. Without assertive action by the school library media specialist, however, school administrators and teachers are likely to be more aware of the media specialist's administrative role than the roles of teacher, instructional partner, and information specialist. Reductions to library media staff and finding common planning time are examples of serious challenges, but these are not insurmountable. In the context of well-planned instructional projects, collaboration with teachers is a primary way that school library media professionals can demonstrate that their work is a vital part of the academic life of their schools, and a positive factor in improving student achievement.

Keywords: School Librarian, Media Specialist, Teacher Collaboration

Today's school library media specialist understands that many of the key areas of responsibility for members of the profession involve effective collaboration with teachers. While the idea of the library media specialist as a dynamic, forceful participant, working hand in hand with classroom teachers to develop and implement the instructional program of the school, has been discussed and studied for some time (Berkowitz & Eisenberg, 1989) for example, note that “school library media specialists have wanted to be actively involved in curriculum since the 1950's” (p. 2), the publication of the second edition of Information Power in 1998 brought a new level of emphasis to the school library media specialist as instructional leader and collaborator. The library media community has viewed Information Power as the definitive statement of who the school library media specialist is. We proudly point to its four key roles of the school library media specialist—teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator—emphasizing the vision of the school library media specialist as instructional partner. While we have done a good job of spreading the gospel of Information Power to existing and newly-trained library school library media personnel, and many school library media specialists have been successful in becoming active instructional leaders in their schools, to a great extent the vision of Information Power has remained within the school library media community itself. Discussions with practicing school library media specialists about the major challenges they face will inevitably include problems with teacher collaboration—it does not happen often enough, and the collaboration that does take place many times does not approach a level where the school library media specialist would be considered an indispensible member of the instructional team. Hartzell (1997) dubbed school library...
media specialists as “invisible” professionals—an unfortunate descriptor, to say the least, but one that gives us pause in these difficult budgetary times. To varying degrees teachers and school administrators—principals, as well as assistant principals in charge of curriculum and instruction—are unclear about the roles of the school library media specialist, and the potential positive impact on the instructional program and, ultimately, upon student achievement, of a fully-functioning library media program. Lance (2010) notes that “Far too many people who now work as administrators and teachers never experienced the sort of school library program the profession advocates today. It’s still that new a model” (p. 81).

It is hard to overstate the importance of building a positive relationship with the building principal and other building-level administrators. In the best schools the principal is the instructional leader, setting the tone, establishing major directions, and communicating key expectations for teacher performance. The assistant principal for curriculum typically manages all programs for instructional improvement, including development of course catalog and master schedule, professional development, and related activities such as professional learning communities. The assistant principal for curriculum is likely to be the person who establishes a structure for collaborative planning across subject areas and grade levels, if such a structure exists, and may be instrumental in setting instructional budget allotments.

The library media specialist needs to be viewed by the building administrators as a major component in the learning process. When there is a major initiative involving the curriculum, literacy, or technology, administrators should consider, as a part of the planning process from the beginning, where the library media program fits into that initiative, and how the library media specialist will have a positive impact. Achieving this level of confidence has as a prerequisite that the administrators understand the many roles of the library media specialist. And while school library media specialists need to articulate the Information Power roles at every opportunity, the best way for the building administrators to understand these multiple roles is to see the library media specialist performing as a leader, as a teacher, as a collaborator, in addition to the traditional administrative roles. As Lance (2010) posits, “teacher-librarians are ultimately responsible for whether or not their educator colleagues understand and embrace the role of teacher-librarian” (p. 82).

Identifying willing collaborators

Technology coordinators often purchase a new instructional software title or the latest hardware for all of the school’s classrooms, only to find the new technology not being used by many of the teachers. Instead of purchasing for all teachers and classrooms, the savvy tech coordinator may, then, decide to pilot the new technology with only one or two teachers. In addition to serving as a test period, the pilot approach also takes advantage of human nature—when we see one of our colleagues with something new, something that appears to hold promise for making our teaching more effective and perhaps easier, we want to acquire it for ourselves and our classrooms. The same principle works for encouraging teachers to join the library media specialist in meaningful, planned collaboration. The more the library media specialist is seen actively engaged in collaboration with teachers—and in implementing the lesson plans that result from those collaboration activities—the more other teachers in the school will want to know what they have to do to get the same kinds of support and service, and the more the principal and other administrators will understand the value that the library media specialist is bringing to the school’s instructional program. The library media specialist looking to foster collaboration with his/her teaching colleagues does not have to try, nor should he/she expect, to be collaborating effectively with all of the school’s teachers from day one. Rather, like the tech coordinator providing the new technology to one or two teachers who are best candidates for modeling its effective use, the library media specialist should identify one or two teachers with whom collaboration has the best chance for success, and then make every effort to see that the resulting lessons and activities are implemented to the satisfaction of the participating teachers.

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The library media specialist-teacher teamwork will spread naturally. There should also be opportunities to share the experiences in departmental, grade-level, and leadership meetings. A key point here is that the library media specialist must not be complacent, satisfied with having found one or two willing
collaborators. On the contrary, every effort must be made to build similar relationships across the school faculty and administrative staff. Achterman and Loertscher (2008) put it this way:

For teacher librarians wanting their programs to become the heart and hub of the school, we are convinced that success comes through one unit at a time, and one more, and one more, until the reputation is strong and the buzz among the faculty is simply this – if you team with the teacher librarian, your students do better. (p. 13)

**Collaboration Defined**

A fundamental question is how to define what we mean by collaboration. For a thorough review of various attempts at defining and understanding the process of collaboration, see Montiel-Overall’s “Toward a Theory of Collaboration for Teachers and Librarians” (2005). Among the attributes of collaboration noted by Montiel-Overall are these:

- interaction between coequal parties (Friend & Cook, 2000)
- joint negotiation of common ground (Olson & Olson, 2000)
- shared power (Johnston & Thomas, 1997)
- joint construction of knowledge (Moll & Whitmore, 1993); (Million & Ware, 1997)
- complementarity of skills, efforts and roles (John-Steiner, Weber, & Minnis, 1998)

For the practitioner, a more useful description, perhaps, is this straightforward statement from Donham (1999):

When teachers and library media specialists work together to identify what students need to know about accessing, evaluating, interpreting and applying information; when they plan how and where these skills will be taught and how they relate the content area learning; when they co-teach so students learn the skills at the time they need them; and when they assess the students’ process as they work with information as well as the end product, they have truly collaborated. (p. 21)

More practical still is this description from Peter Millbury (2005), co-founder and moderator of LM_NET, from his article entitled “Collaboration: Ten Important Reasons to Take It Seriously”:

Collaboration includes many levels of helpful activities and services that SLMSs are trained to provide to teachers. These range from providing answers to reference questions, to brainstorming ideas for library research projects, to acting as a full-fledged partner in lesson planning, implementation, and evaluation. Any way you look at it, collaboration with teachers is a powerful experience and one of the most important services that school library media specialists have to offer. (p. 31)

Millbury purports, among other things, that collaboration increases student achievement; allows the SLMS to model successful, desirable practices; and reinforces the SLMS’ role as an educational leader while minimizing the stereotypical clerical role.

As Bush and Jones (2010) state, the “creative phenomenon” that is collaboration “is written about in such lofty and grandiose terms that it scares us away from venturing forth” (p. 83). For the practicing school library media specialist the question is not so much how we define collaborating with teachers, but whether to get on with the work. If the SLMS and teachers are actively working together, some good things are likely to occur, and the collaboration process can mature as teachers and the SLMS gain trust and respect for each other.

What characteristics, knowledge and skills are prerequisites for the school library media specialist who is successful in the area of teacher collaboration? In our school library media program at the University of West Georgia, increasingly we are attending to the professional dispositions of our candidates, who complete a variety of projects while working in collaborative groups. As candidates participate in these collaborative efforts, faculty evaluate the extent to which candidates promote group goals, actively solicit ideas from others so that all members are represented in the final product, and willingly contribute the time and effort needed to ensure the overall success of the group. While it goes without saying that the successful school library media specialist must know how to administer the library media program, understand information literacy, and be able to learn and use new technologies, in the end school library media is at its heart a people business.

**In Search of Information Literacy**

Achterman & Loertscher (2008) note that “traditionally teacher librarians have concentrated much effort on helping students locate information. Not surprisingly, students think of research largely as gathering and organizing facts” (p. 10). The level of difficulty in finding appropriate materials for use in
The definition of information literacy has become more complex as resources and technologies have changed. Information literacy has progressed from the simple definition of using technologies but also has to help teachers determine how to use them effectively in the classroom. So how does this amalgam of data translate into what the SLMS does on a day to day basis? As it turns out the “blogosphere” has quite a number of examples on various “support” sites in which practicing professionals offer tips, tricks, and hints on how to solve technology related problems and more importantly how to help the teachers in the school incorporate these tools into their daily instruction. For example, on the Georgia Library Media Association Blog Jim Randolph (2010) of Partee Elementary discusses how he uses Google Docs to help him organize his “Reader Rally.” In addition to blogs many professional organizations (including AECT) also host webinars that can serve as a resource to help the SLMS better incorporate Web 2.0 technologies into their daily work. One such example was a November, 2010, webinar hosted by edWeb.net and presented by Michelle Luhtala of New Canaan High School which focused on how social media is being incorporated into the “social library” to allow for increased collaboration not only within the school but with other libraries and the community (Schmucki, 2010). School library media specialists need this type of information about how to handle the problems they face daily.

So how can the SLMS avoid the trap of becoming just another technical support specialist and, rather, become a true collaborator? Figure 1 presents a very simplified representation of a strategy for collaboration with school faculty. First and foremost the SLMS needs to know
the instructional needs of the faculty (Instructional Standards). This really should begin with becoming familiar with state instructional standards and follow with conversations with teachers about what they are teaching and what they will soon be teaching (Instructional Schedule). Along with this the SLMS should also be familiar with many of the technology-related tools available to educators (Appropriate Technologies) and that also tie in with information and technology literacy. It is very important to note that the SLMS should not use a favorite technology (such as a blog) to solve every instructional problem (a solution in search of a problem) but should rather focus on finding appropriate answers to the problems that the faculty are facing. The SLMS can then determine where the “intersections” are and offer to collaborate with teachers on lessons that can not only benefit them in the classroom but can also help their students obtain the 21st century skills related to information and technology literacy that they will need.

As more schools and districts adopt ISTE’s NETS for Teachers 2008, school library media specialists looking for willing collaborators, particularly with technology tools, are gaining support. NETS for Teachers has collaboration as a major theme, illustrated in these objectives for teachers:

- promote student reflection using collaborative tools to reveal and clarify students’ conceptual understanding and thinking, planning, and creative processes;
- model collaborative knowledge construction by engaging in learning with students, colleagues, and others in face-to-face and virtual environments;
- collaborate with students, peers, parents, and community members using digital tools and resources to support student success and innovation (ISTE, 2008).

The digital and collaborative tools noted in NETS for Teachers are mirrored in Valenza’s (2011) list of competencies that teacher librarians need to master—specific competencies which go beyond the general skills and concepts typically associated with school librarians—including these: tools such as blogs, wikis, or Google Sites to create a web presence for the library media center; digital storytelling tools like Animoto, Glogster, and VoiceThread; new search tools, such as RSS feeds and Google’s custom search; free, web-based interactive polling tools for conducting original research; social networking bookmarking tools; web-based pathfinders, in the form of wikis or blogs, or more specific tools such as LibGuides and Only2Clicks; and ways to publish digital work, such as Anthologize, Bookemon, and Simplebooklet for Teachers.

School library media specialists who excel in these areas are positioned to assume leadership roles in the instructional programs of their schools, and are more likely to be accepted by administrators and teachers as the instructional and informational professionals they are.

Doing More With Less

A recent thread in the georgiamedia electronic mailing list, an online community of over 800 school library media specialists and related educators, was entitled, simply, “DROWNING” (Boney, 2010). The post was a plea for help in devising ways to cope, as a library media specialist alone, with the work load that had previously been done with the help of a full-time paraprofessional. Georgia, like many states, has seen significant cutbacks in staffing in school library media centers across our state. Schools that had two certified media specialist positions have been reduced to one. Entire districts have eliminated media center paraprofessional positions, as school and district administrators grapple with how to maintain essential services in the face of decreasing funding levels. [Efforts to maintain library media staffing have also been harmed by the weakening of standards by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS – now SACS CASI).] In Georgia, the most common school library media staffing model may now be that of one certified library media specialist, with no support personnel. Some other states have been hit even harder. Surveying school library administrators from across the country, AASL found that many school library media specialists are being required to serve in two schools within a district, while others have been assigned additional duties, including classroom teaching for portions of the school day (American Library Association, 2010). In all of these scenarios, the school library media specialist is forced to make difficult decisions...
about prioritization of time and services. An LM_NET thread on how to operate a school library media center with zero support staff included a host of ideas, including these:

- Enlisting help of parent and student volunteers, including interns from high school mentoring programs or nearby colleges/universities;
- Petitioning principals to assist with scheduling at least some time during the school day to be used for instructional planning;
- Implementing a system of self-checkout by students and faculty;
- Looking for shortcuts to shelving returned books (e.g., “I minimized seasonal displays of books and displayed books as they were returned instead. Much easier to stand a book up on a shelf for display than to shelve it normally. I displayed LOTS of books on tops of my books [sic] shelves and windowsills”; and, “I set a timer and limited myself to 10 minutes per day of shelving. I did not go to graduate school to shelve books and I don’t think it is a prudent use of the dollars spent on my salary. . . ”). (Strobin, 2009)

Creative approaches like these remind us that school library media specialists must do everything possible to use their time working on the professional duties of teacher-librarian, rather than on clerical duties.

Another significant challenge to school library media specialist-teacher collaboration is fixed scheduling, something over which the school library media specialist often has little control. When does one find the time to plan with teachers, particularly if the teachers’ common planning time with subject or grade-level or colleagues falls when the media specialist is part of their “specials” rotation? Rowe (2007) suggests that “It ain’t easy, but it is possible.” Her best advice is to “be a constant presence,” utilizing some of the same approaches that we employ in any situation—volunteer for every possible instructional committee, work with school-wide events when possible, provide lesson-specific support to teachers, look for opportunities to co-teach. Faced with a change to a fixed schedule upon arrival of a new principal in her elementary school, media specialist Cassandra Barnett (2008) collaborated with music and art teachers, creating lessons that allowed each of them to contribute from her area of expertise while ensuring that students’ activities in their specialty classes connected to what was being studied in the regular classroom.

Given inadequate staffing the reality is that there will be some tasks that just don’t get done, others that are done only minimally. It is imperative, however, that the focus of the school library media specialist’s efforts remain on things that most directly impact instruction, efforts that often involve collaboration with teacher colleagues. Bush and Jones (2010) point out that instructional collaboration includes others, too, including students, public librarians, and community resources such as museums and other schools. Ann Martin, in her book Seven Steps to an Award-Winning School Library Program (2005), presents some practical ways to overcome barriers that can inhibit meaningful collaboration. A major point in Martin’s approach is to involve key faculty members, as well as administrators, students, parents and community members, in all phases of the change process. Doing so helps to offset potential negative reactions to new library media center initiatives, and at the same time shares with patrons and colleagues the vision for a library media program that is an integral part of the school curriculum.

**Collaboration Itself Not the Goal**

While the school library media profession’s attention to collaboration is merited, Johnson (2006) cautions against collaboration for collaboration’s sake:

What everyone seems to forget is that collaboration is just one means (and not always the best one) of achieving a goal, not the goal itself. Too many library media center studies say ‘such and such’ led to greater collaboration. Big whoop. Did it lead to more measurable student learning? (p. 98)

Johnson also points out that what is purported to be collaboration is sometimes, in fact, codependency, if the school library media specialist develops units where he/she continues to do things that would be better taught so that teachers and students could, and would, do those things themselves (e.g., making a digital movie or creating a wiki). “We have more strength in the long run if we teach others how to do a thing (especially with technology) than if we simply do it for them” (p. 98). Collaboration is worthwhile in the context of well-planned instructional projects, and when it is “the most effective means of achieving a worthwhile goal” (p. 98), rather than being an end in itself (Johnson, 2006).

It is an understatement to say that these are challenging times for schools, and for school library media programs. School library media specialists need to demonstrate, perhaps now more than at any time in the history
of the profession, that the work they do is meaningful, relevant, having a positive impact on instructional programs and, ultimately, on student achievement. At the same time the resources, particularly personnel resources, with which to do the work are being reduced, sometimes dramatically so. This difficult environment calls for a type of collaboration not yet mentioned here, but that should go without saying – that of school library media specialists collaborating with each other, within and across districts, as we strive to make our programs a more vibrant and relevant part of the life of every student, teacher and administrator.

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References


