The Teacher’s Take, Part 2: The Instructional Role of the School Librarian

by Carl Harvey II

Part two of “The Teachers’ Take” on the school library program in North Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana, focuses on collaboration and the instructional role of the school librarian. The teachers interviewed for this segment are Cathy Lalley, 4th grade; Sally Morrison, 4th grade; Janene Krent, music teacher; and Emily Griggs, 1st grade. Cathy and Sally are veteran teachers with over twenty-five years of experience. Janene has been teaching for over ten years and Emily has been teaching for about five years.

One of the common threads between the questions asked in this interview and those asked in the previous issue is the focus on the role of the school librarian. The questions for this article, however, focus on the role of the school librarian in instruction—planning, teaching, and assessing. It’s obvious from the responses that these teachers take notice and highly value this element of the program. Each section in this article begins with a question posed to the participating teachers, followed by the teachers’ answers, and my commentary.

Q: Why did you start working with the school librarian?

Cathy: Having taught for many years when the librarians were part of the specials rotation, I had limited exposure to collaborating with the librarian. Our present school librarian offered to attend one of our grade-level planning meetings each week to listen and learn about the fourth grade curriculum. I was amazed at how prepared he was—having read our curriculum standards, knowing which materials would enhance our instruction, how we could incorporate various technology projects into our plans, etc. It wasn’t difficult at all to see what a valuable resource this staff member would be to our planning sessions, and he has been in attendance ever since!

Janene: Because he asked me to. He came to me with some great ideas on how to utilize the resources in my building for the betterment of my year-long plan and my students.

Sally: He came into our building wanting to be part of the family. He volunteered to help in any way he could and gave ideas as to how he could help. He was non-threatening and sincere.

Harvey: School librarians can’t wait for an invitation; you have to make your own. It takes time and persistence, but school librarians have to take the initiative to be out there actively working to build those collaborative bridges.

Q: How does planning work between the teachers and the school librarian?

Janene: Since I am also the only specialist of my kind in the building, we meet one-on-one to discuss changing any plans we have in place now and new ventures in collaboration we would like to try. Grade-level teachers meet with him during their planning time most often on a weekly basis.

Sally: He attends grade-level weekly planning sessions. He knows our year-long plans and standards, and is always looking for new ideas to enrich our programs.

Harvey: Every grade level in my building plans as a team and luckily they all plan at a different time each week, so I try my best to attend their planning sessions. Some weeks are better than others depending on what else is going on. When I do miss a meeting, I always send an email asking them to let me know if there is anything I can do. In this way the culture of working with the school librarian has been established, so if I do miss planning meetings, or I don’t have any ideas, teachers feel very comfortable coming to me with their ideas for projects and activities.
Q: Some teachers are reluctant to collaborate because they feel it will take too much planning time. What advice do you have for them?

Cathy: If your school librarian attends your regular grade-level planning session, it does not increase your planning time. He/she contributes as a grade-level teacher would. Would it really matter if you are meeting with two, three, or five people? Great things can be accomplished in meetings when ten or more people are meeting if you have an agenda and stick to it. Plus, the benefit of another professional educator’s contributions far outweigh what little additional time might be spent on hearing another person’s ideas. Everyone benefits from the exchange of ideas, especially the students!

Janene: Again, just invite that librarian in for one meeting or give them your year-long plan and ask them to come back to you with a few ideas. It really doesn’t take additional time once something is established.

Sally: It might at first, but it becomes easier as the comfort level increases. If you are willing to listen, and are open to new ideas, collaborating actually saves time because the school librarian knows what is available and not as much time is spent searching for materials, good Web sites, etc.

Harvey: We actually find that it takes far less time for us to work together. Not only do I attend planning sessions, but our resource teachers do as well. This means we all know what is going on and can provide a real consistent learning environment and opportunities for students. We also find the synergy from group planning brings out the best ideas—which can only be a good thing for students.

Q: What advice would you give to teachers who are not currently collaborating with their school librarian?

Cathy: If your school librarian is presently not collaborating with you, then please take the initiative to invite him/her to your next grade-level planning session. You will be amazed at the wealth of knowledge he/she may have in regard to the instructional resources available at their fingertips. In the event that there is a shortage or maybe nothing in our school library or computer lab to support what I need for a specific classroom lesson or project, our school librarian will find something from another source to support our grade level curriculum.

Janene: Don’t be afraid to try something. Take baby steps at collaborating. Make your school librarian aware of areas of your curriculum you would like to expand and let his wheels do the turning for a while.

Sally: Don’t assume that the school librarian isn’t interested in collaborating. Talk to him/her and extend an invitation to attend the grade-level meetings. If your grade level does not collaborate, you can still do so with the librarian. It might catch on. Invite the librarian to Jim Dandy Friday.

Emily: Selfishly, I would say, “Oh! You don’t need to collaborate with your school librarian.” That way I could work with my school librarian that much more! But in all honesty, I would have to say that working alongside with your school librarian is wonderful for your students because they get the advantage of the old saying “two heads are better than one” and it shares the load both in teaching and planning. Another great advantage is that the school librarian has worked with other grade levels and has an idea of how to connect curriculum and content across grade levels. Since cross grade-level meetings are few and far between in our busy calendars, this person is your liaison for what is going on in other grade levels. This person can also be a wonderful asset for you if you are insecure about using technology. Your school librarian can walk you and your class through a lesson or two and then you can implement the new technology into your classroom. There are too many advantages to name them all!

Harvey: Teachers whom the school librarian has collaborated with successfully can be the best advocates for helping other teachers come around. When teachers see their colleagues and hear about the great things they did in the school library, it can serve as great encouragement for them to work with the school librarian, too.

Q: How do you see students benefiting through team-teaching?

Cathy: I am a proponent of team-teaching, because I team-teach in my classroom each and every day with my teaching partner. That old adage of “two heads are better than one” rings true through team-teaching. Since children have different learning styles, it greatly benefits the students to have new concepts presented in different ways by different educators, who may also have different teaching styles. Some children may learn it one way and others another way. I also think that it is valuable for children to recognize that different learning styles and different teaching styles are perfectly okay. Team-teaching brings the strengths of both teachers together for the benefit of the students.

Janene: They find that the school librarian is another vital part of the team in their education. As well, in these times of soaring class sizes, another pair of hands helps that many more kids and their individual needs.

Sally: The students have the advantage of multiple hands and eyes to answer questions. They see us working as a team to help them. They see that the school librarian is treated with the
same respect as any other teacher in the building.

Emily: The more team-teaching we do, the more attention and guidance each student gets in my classroom. After working so closely so often with our school librarian, he knows the students and has an excellent connection with them, as well as an idea of what they are capable of doing. The fresh eyes, hands, and voice from another caring adult that wants success for each child is motivating for all involved.

Harvey: I think they said it all! When we all work together, it creates amazing things for students!

Q: How does the school librarian communicate with you?

Cathy: Communication with the school librarian occurs in a manner of ways. Before our attempt to go paperless, he published a Media Matters newsletter which we received in our mailboxes, and communicated in person and through email. Now, we still communicate in person, as well as through email, blogs, podcasts, staff intranet, staff meetings, and through professional development mini-lessons.

Janene: E-mail quite often, face-to-face chats, or collaboration days.

Sally: Our school librarian communicates with us through emails, intranet, professional development, face to face, and food.

Harvey: I’ll be honest, I love to talk! I love to share. I want everyone to know about the school library program and what we have to offer, so I take advantage of any medium and opportunity to share.

Q: How does your school librarian contribute to the overall culture of learning (or professional learning communities) in your school?

Cathy: Our school librarian often attends the Professional Learning Communities meetings and has set up a staff intranet where we post the minutes of these meetings for all to peruse. He will continue to be an integral part of these meetings this school year, as we expand into podcasting at each grade level.

Janene: He is interwoven into each grade level because he chooses to get involved with every subgroup in the school. He provides support for every group within our school. In turn, he impacts the learning of every child directly and indirectly at times.

Sally: By being a member of multiple committees, he knows what is going on all over the building. He knows every staff member and all students. He is able to anticipate the needs of the staff and students, eliminating a lot of stress for the rest of us.

Harvey: Because I believe that the school library program can have an impact on almost anything that happens in the school, I want to make sure I’m aware of what is going on. When we are studying student data from assessments and making changes to the school instructional program—I’m there! When we are talking about professional development needs—I’m there! We use Professional Learning Communities a lot as a way for grade levels to discuss what they are doing to help us reach the school goals. I attend those from time to time to offer ideas or to provide training. I want to develop a culture so that the school library program isn’t an afterthought when decisions are made involving school planning. Instead, the school librarian is involved in the decisions!

Q: What key non-teaching functions do you see your school librarian providing?

Cathy: Our school librarian is highly skilled in writing grants and finding money to build our instructional resources collection. He also attends conferences to stay current on library media standards and curricular resources available to support those standards. Our school librarian is also an integral part of our school leadership by being a member of the School Improvement Network for our district and a member of the Professional Development Committee of our school. He also serves on our district Technology Committee.

Janene: He keeps up with resources that I may not be up to speed on or that I am not taking advantage of, and helps me see how to use those in my classroom.

Sally: He is very supportive and will follow through on projects, requests, etc. He is a friend to the staff and students. Everyone knows who he is and also knows they can go to him at any time with questions for help.

Harvey: The elements they notice are those that directly impact the students and teachers. Notice what they didn’t say. There was nothing about cataloging or other clerical type jobs. Those things, while important for a school library program, go unnoticed. The things they did notice are the involvement in committees in the building and the attitude projected throughout the building. As school librarians work to allocate precious available time, it is important to think about those things that are going to make the most impact for the school library program.

Conclusion

The role we school librarians play in instruction is huge. We bring with us the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner from AASL. We bring with us knowledge of technology tools and their applications. The teachers bring with them the curriculum. When we combine all that together, powerful things happen for students!

Carl A. Harvey II is the school librarian at North Elementary School, Noblesville, IN. Email: carl@carl-harvey.com