



FOCUS ON COLLABORATION

How Understanding the Nature of Trust Can Help Address the Standards

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COLLABORATE

The National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries (ALA 2018) are comprised of six Shared Foundations: *Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage*. This article will focus on the Shared Foundation of *Collaborate*.

Importance of Collaboration

Since 1988, standards and guidelines for the school librarian have included references to school librarians' serving as instructional partners (AASL and AECT 1988, 1998; AASL 2007). In fact, Daniel Callison noted that in the 1998 edition of *Information Power* the word "collaboration" appeared over sixty times. Teacher and librarian collaboration is a main theme in school librarianship and education research and professional literature: views of collaboration, encouraging teachers to collaborate, theories of collaboration, and how to collaborate effectively. Now, within AASL's *National School Library Standards*, Collaboration is one of the six Shared Foundations on which the standards are based.

Why is collaboration so important? Ken Haycock stated that "collaboration is the single professional behavior of teacher-librarians that most affects student achievement" (2007, 32). Improving collaboration in schools, and particularly collaboration between teachers and the school librarian, is of benefit to students both directly and indirectly, and helps improve student academic achievement (e.g., Houston 2008; Lance and

Loertscher 2001). In AASL's *National School Library Standards* the key commitment for Collaboration is to "work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals" (2018). We want our students to be able to interact with a wide variety of people and work together effectively. Therefore, we must not only teach them the skills necessary to collaborate, but we must engage in collaboration ourselves.

Importance of Trust

It may seem a cliché, but developing trust is the first step toward building effective working relationships with colleagues. In fact, studies show that trust is a significant predictor of collaboration; the higher the levels of trust, the higher the levels of collaboration in schools (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000). In schools with trusting environments, teachers are more likely to disclose more accurate, relevant, and complete information regarding problems, enabling them to engage in dialogue about their problem areas and areas of improvement (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000). Only by being vulnerable in this way can educators—including school librarians—improve their

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instructional practice. To avoid duplicating efforts and ensuring students' needs are met, each party in a collaborative endeavor needs to trust that the other will do his or her job effectively and communicate consistently.

To “[partner] with other educators to scaffold learning and organize learner groups to broaden and deepen understanding” (AASL 2018, School Library III.A.1.) or “...[include] the school community in the development of school library policies and procedures” (AASL 2018, School Library III.B.3.) librarians must build and maintain trust with the members of the school community, including parents, students, administrators, and teachers. Here are a few things school librarians can do to help build or maintain trust among their colleagues:

1. **Communicate** effectively and consistently.
2. Build awareness of each other's knowledge base and set boundaries on your own to **determine who knows what.**
3. Fulfill your promises and **be careful about making commitments.**

Communicate

Communication is not just about sharing ideas and resources; it often indicates the sender's values, habits, and skills. A school librarian who sends an overcrowded text-heavy e-mail sends a different message than one who uses a powerful technology tool to create a graphic flyer. Not only does the librarian subtly indicate an understanding of the audience, the librarian is demonstrating technology skills. Furthermore, school librarians must remember to educate the teachers and administrators in their building about their skill sets and the services they provide; many teachers may not know that the school librarian can write lessons, teach, and assess student learning just like classroom teachers do. How this information is formally disseminated depends in large part on the culture of the school and the mechanisms already in place. A weekly or monthly newsletter, or a quarterly report may be a way to present this information, but if no one reads the report or newsletter, it's not effective. If a school has a student newsletter or video-based news crew, inviting the students to do a story on the library or share announcements would be a better choice for reaching both students and teachers. A school librarian may also consider creating

flyers or pamphlets for teachers, presenting at teacher orientation sessions and staff meetings, and even sharing at district-wide professional development opportunities. Informal mechanisms such as hosting a back-to-school tea or “check out the new books party” can be useful too and will encourage teachers to visit the library and get to know the librarian both professionally and personally.

Determine Who Knows What

An often-overlooked way to build effective working relationships is to accurately identify who knows what within the school. Even if all other aspects of an organization foster and support collaboration, people won't connect on new projects or collaborate to solve existing problems if they don't have an understanding of one another's knowledge base (Cross and Parker 2004). In addition to teachers knowing what the school librarian can do, it is important for librarians to understand other educators' skill sets. One way to identify who knows what is through orientation games or surveys at the beginning of the year. If each teacher lists not only professional strengths but also personal interests, a catalog of knowledge is created through which the entire school community can identify individuals who may be helpful in a particular situation.

A school librarian who fosters this sort of information-gathering can help serve as a knowledge broker, connecting diverse participants within the school community. Librarians naturally help their users find information, but that information is not relegated only to books and databases. Information also comes from experts. If the librarian comes to be known not only as a resource for locating information and for modeling and teaching other information-literacy skills but also as one who can connect people, the librarian's value will increase within the community. Opportunities for collaboration will increase as well.

It is important, however, that individuals not only identify what they know to others within their organization but also set boundaries on the limits of their knowledge. Although this boundary-setting can be a challenge, it is important that the school librarian—and others—not let the pressure to be an expert in all areas result in anyone answering questions with more confidence than they should. The possibility of incorrectly answering a question can create a wedge in the trust that exists. This is not to say that nobody can ever make mistakes. It *does* mean thinking about what time and knowledge an individual possesses and whether taking on a requested task is reasonable. For example, if a teacher came to the librarian with a DVD stuck in a computer disc drive, the librarian might say something like "I know a few tricks, but I'm not sure exactly where the problem lies. I'll look into it for you and let you know," rather than saying, "Sure. I'd be happy to fix that for you." The first statement is very clear about intentions and doesn't create false expectations.

Be Careful about Making Commitments

Another critical way of building and maintaining trust is through the fulfillment of promises. It's easy in the hectic chaos of a school year to forget something, wait until the last minute, or say "yes" to something too time-consuming. Unfortunately, if a strong relationship does not already exist, breaking promises—even small ones—can result in mistrust that is difficult to repair. Before engaging in a new project, or committing to a task, all librarians should be sure they have the time to do it. Being clear about timelines and expectations helps in this process. A teacher might be mildly annoyed that it will take a week to get back to her with resources for her class, but she'll learn that the librarian is in high demand. If instead, the librarian promises to get back to the teacher the next day and then takes five days, the teacher learns that the librarian is unreliable, and the teacher may not reach out to the librarian in the future.

Working with Students

Communicating, determining who knows what, and being careful about commitments are skills to help foster trust between colleagues, but they apply to students as well. For example, a school librarian who wishes to "[stimulate] learners to actively contribute to group discussions" (AASL 2018, School Librarian III.D.I.) will have a much easier time getting students to contribute to in-class activities if the librarian already has a trusting relationship with students. Students are much more likely to engage in discussion and try new things if they trust the librarian to look out for them

and their interests. Although the channels of communication might differ, a librarian who communicates effectively with students; takes time to understand their skills, abilities, and interests; and keeps his or her promises will have a good start on forming a trusting environment in the library.

School librarians who want to address the AASL Standards' Shared Foundation of Collaboration with learners would do well to set the stage for collaborative work by allowing students time to get to know one another and helping build that trust. One way to foster this trust is to build in time at the beginning of the year or the beginning of a collaborative unit for students to build friendships with their classmates. Playing cooperative games, sharing likes and dislikes, and having social time will help build relationships that inspire trust. After students have had time to get to know one another, the librarian can encourage collaboration by grouping students together (in pairs or larger groups) intentionally so that students' skills complement the skills of others in the group. For example, in a lesson that asks students to use mathematics to draw a picture to scale, the teacher might pair students having stronger measuring skills with students who are more artistic. Not only does this tactic force students to work with those they might not otherwise have worked with, it requires them to depend on each other for assistance.



Asking students to be reflective about the experience can cement the ideas that learning is a social responsibility and diverse perspectives enhance the process. At lower grades, a simple question like “Was it easier to draw the picture with help or without help? Why?” can be asked. With older students, a librarian or teacher might ask students to discuss what they did when they disagreed with each other or the process they went through to solve a challenge. Routinely engaging students in structured collaborative and reflective activities will help them develop the skills necessary to work with others.

Conclusion

Once relationships are formed, they can be leveraged to meet the standards. For example, School Library standard III.B.3, “Including the school community in the development of school library policies and procedures” requires community input and participation. Having existing connections with teachers, parents, and students will allow the standard to be enacted more smoothly. Similarly, enacting School Library standard III.A.1, “Partnering with other educators to scaffold learning and organize learner groups to broaden and deepen understanding” will be much more effective if the librarian has prior relationships with teachers.

Understanding how both large and small actions influence the trust built and maintained with colleagues, parents, and students can help ensure that those relationships flourish. Once personal and professional connections have been made, librarians can use them to collaborate frequently and effectively. Relationships are critical both for teachers and students; and they must be intentionally fostered and maintained. A librarian who focuses on relationships within the school community will increase his or her success in addressing the standards and cementing the library’s role in the school.



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