

The Experience of School and Public Library Collaboration

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School and public library collaboration can be beneficial for libraries in rural areas. Collaborating allows libraries to share resources, promote services, and build stronger connections (Moreland and Kammer 2020). The problem is that while school and public libraries collaborate, they may not always have deep or sustained collaboration (Smith 2014). To learn more, we conducted a study to understand how school and public librarians in rural areas described their collaborative experiences, and what similarities and differences they used when describing them. We hoped to provide insight into new ways schools and libraries could collaborate better.

Background

School and public librarians are active collaborators within their communities. Historically, librarians understand they serve the same populations because children and teachers attend the school and public library (Fenwick 1960). School and public library collaboration is often affected by organizational culture as both need institutional support to collaborate outside of the library building (Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker 2014). Many school librarians report great satisfaction when collaborating with public librarians (and vice versa) as collaborating develops new relationships and improves the librarians' professional

learning networks (Pandora and Hayman 2013). Unfortunately, both school and public library administrations are often unaware of the value collaboration can provide learners and librarians (Collen 2013).

To find out about librarians' collaborations in rural areas, we conducted twenty interviews with school and public librarians. The librarians were all from a rural area in the Midwest. We asked librarians to reflect on their collaborative experiences. We used a method of research called phenomenology that allowed us to look at these interviews from the perspective of the librarian's lived experience. Using a technique called bracketing, we were able to identify the essence of each librarian's statements to understand how they think and feel about collaborating between libraries.

What We Learned

We were able to sort what we learned into four themes: the meaning of collaboration, the role of communication, the dilemma of demonstrating value, and the impact of perceptions and limitations. Some of the most interesting findings in this study were:

- School librarians often focus primarily on collaborating with teachers and other educators in their buildings. Public librarians may also collaborate with teachers,

though school librarians may be unaware of these collaborations. Public librarians also work with many students in the community, helping them with homework and offering a summer reading program.

- Public librarians felt dependent on the school librarians to advertise youth programming, like summer reading programs. School librarians were happy to provide this publicity and described this support as part of the collaborative experience.
- Public librarians may be unsure who to contact within the school to start a collaboration. They may also not understand school library scheduling and be unfamiliar with school curriculum. Similarly, school librarians described uncertainty about the full array of public library collections and programming.
- School and public librarians wanted to show their communities their libraries' relevance. Collaboration could help with this, but it sometimes had a negative impact on relevancy if the collaboration was not mutually beneficial.
- School librarians are interested in collaborations that support students and meet educational standards. Public librarians are interested in learning about edu-

educational standards and how they can help.

- Maintaining and sustaining meaningful collaborations is hard when staff changes. School and public librarians described challenges keeping up with staff changes at the other library.
- Both school and public librarians felt limited by their schedules and the space available for collaborating.

Implications for Practice

There are many implications for practice that came from this study. First, good communication is essential to build relationships; it's also vital to keep the other librarian informed about what is happening at their library. One of the challenges for public librarians was not knowing who to contact in the school. The school librarian can be the first one to make contact to start a new collaboration or just establish communication. A school librarian may start by contacting the youth or children's librarian, outreach librarian, or the director of the library if it is a small, rural library. Flexible methods of communicating, like e-mail, web conferencing, or phone calls, are important so that collaboration can happen within the constraints of the school librarian's schedule.

Another implication for practice is that collaboration will work better when administrators of both the school and public library are supportive and understand the benefits of collaborating. Library advisory boards that include public and school librarians or representatives from these institutions can help develop a cultural memory in case of staff changes; these boards can also begin the process of building collaboration into strategic plans. Representatives from the school or

public library can provide perspective during policy and planning processes.

Public librarians may wish to host professional development opportunities for school librarians when the school semester is over. One of the public librarians in our study did this and it seemed to be a good way for these librarians to connect each year about initiatives. When public librarians understand current educational standards, they can design programming that supports these standards. Simultaneously, school librarians can learn what the public library offers and how it can support their school community. Many school and public librarians in our study described great satisfaction and personal fulfillment when working with each other in small or large capacities.

Now that we understand more about what makes collaboration work between these librarians, we would



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like to understand more about the impact of the collaborations they do together.



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