We completed a meta-analysis examining the strategies that made collaboration successful for three school librarians and their teacher collaborators. The research started after reflecting on conversations we had with other school librarians in the field. We repeatedly heard school librarians in various settings ask, How can we collaborate better? How can I get teachers to collaborate with me? Is collaboration possible with so many constraints? While these questions led to great discussions, we wanted more definitive answers as to what made collaboration work between teachers and school librarians.

Background

To get started, we framed our research in what is already known about theories of school librarian collaboration to improve instruction, and paired these theories with collaboration models from other fields of study. Collaboration in schools is highly contextual and cultural; what may work for one group of collaborators may not work for another due to the unique historical, cultural, interpersonal, and institutional factors in each school. In the field of school librarianship, we have a clearly defined conceptual model, the Teacher and Librarian Collaboration Model (TLC), that describes the working relationship between a school librarian and teacher to improve instruction for students in their content areas (Montiel-Overall 2005a; 2005b). The model was appropriate for our paper as we examined the impact of collaboration on teaching and learning for teachers, school librarians, and students.

Our research sought to extend the TLC model by examining teacher and school librarian collaboration using factors that influence successful collaboration in organizations. First, we had to identify what we meant by “successful collaboration.” We determined that successful collaboration meant the teacher and school librarian were both satisfied with the collaboration, and they were able to positively impact learning because of their collaboration.

The three studies we examined within this framework were very different but all sought to collaborate with a goal to eventually improve student learning. Matthew King conducted action research in an elementary school to develop collaborative plans with each grade level, with the goal of developing a culture of collaboration (2019). Heather Koeberl collaborated with a history teacher and conducted action research in a middle school to increase engagement using picture books (2019). Allison Donahay collaborated with a teacher in the English language learner program and conducted action research to increase access to the library for English language learners (2019). Together, these collaborations were examined for similarities and differences.

What We Learned

Using a qualitative meta-analysis approach, we analyzed each of the three action research studies (King 2019; Koeberl 2019; Donahay 2019), as well as narratives from the educators involved in the action research, to find out what made the collaborations successful. First, we looked at what the teachers and school librarians described as leading to their success. Next, we identified specific events during the collaboration that were described positively by the authors of each action research study. Finally, we analyzed the collaboration within the framework of Paul Mattesich and Kristen Johnson’s twenty-two factors supporting successful collaboration in organizations (2018).

We found that teachers and school librarians in these collaborations felt they had mutual respect for each other. They spoke very highly of the collaboration and of all the individuals involved in the collaboration. The teachers and school librarians also were willing to be flexible with their time and were willing to make curricular adaptations. Most of the collaboration teams made time to meet outside of school hours and were willing to change established curriculum...
and practices. The collaborations allowed educators to work toward content-area standards and school library standards (AASL 2018).

We also found that each collaboration team described the collaborations as meaningful for educators and students. Descriptions of what made collaboration successful centered around five themes: role of the school librarian, value of relationships, shared knowledge, awareness as a catalyst, and overcoming challenges. The educators felt the collaboration was successful when it increased student achievement and reduced barriers for students to use the school library. To make this happen, the teachers and school librarians spent time learning more about each other’s roles and content areas, including understanding the student perspective prior to the collaboration and finding solutions to common constraints of collaborating in schools.

**Implications for Practice**

As teachers learn more about the benefits of collaborating with school librarians, the more willing they may be to find time to collaborate. All the teachers in our study described themselves as being transformed after collaborating with the school librarian, as they learned more about what value the library and librarian added to their classes and students. Clear and mutually established goals for collaboration, along with a clear framework to guide the collaboration, were critical to build the librarian–teacher relationships in this study. For example, King made time to train the teachers in his collaboration on the AASL Standards and the school librarian’s role by creating a collaboration template and handout and explaining it to the teachers at the start of the collaboration (2019).

Another implication for practice is that while teachers benefit by learning more about the role of the school librarian, school librarians may benefit by learning more about the content area with which they are collaborating. The school librarians in these collaborations made time to learn more about the teaching strategies used by their collaborators. For example, Donahay read books on sheltered instruction and culturally responsive teaching.
Lastly, during collaboration, it is helpful to measure success in some way. For Koeberl (2019) this meant measuring student engagement to see if the collaboration increased engagement in a history class. Other ways to measure success may be pre- and post-student surveys; tracking circulation statistics for a particular subset of library resources (a database used with students, e-book circulations, a specific type of print resource); or student reflections. Donahay (2019) tracked the circulation of literature in other languages before, during, and after collaboration with the school’s English language teacher.

Gathering both quantitative and qualitative data on the success of collaboration can prove useful not only in informing future collaboration but also in advocating with administration for time and resources to collaborate more effectively.

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**Works Cited:**


