

School Library Instruction: Does Experience Matter?

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Imagine that you are a school-based administrator searching for a school librarian. Your primary goal is to hire a school librarian who will facilitate an exemplary school library instructional program. Three certified school librarians have applied for the position. Each has recently earned a Master's degree with a specialty in school librarianship from a program recognized by the American Association of School Librarians in an educational unit accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. The first candidate has no teaching experience; the second candidate has three years of teaching experience; and the third has nine years of teaching experience.

Intuitively, you may hire the candidate with the most teaching experience based on the premise that more teaching experience will yield better pedagogical skills. Existing research examining traditional classroom teaching indicates that "the simple assumption that more teaching experience is better requires greater nuance; experience effects are complex and depend on a number of factors" (Rice 2010, 1).

Background

In my previous experiences as an elementary, middle, and high school librarian, I experienced challenges providing instruction in school library settings in comparison to experiences in the traditional classroom. I was fortunate as a novice school librarian to be provided with mentoring and professional development opportunities to address those challenges.

I currently work with pre-service school librarian degree candidates in securing practical experiences and employment with local school systems. I have noted a preference by school system library supervisors and building-based administrators to hire school librarians with greater teaching experience vs. those candidates with little or no teaching experience.

Research Study

To explore whether teaching experience correlates with success in the teacher role of school librarians, I collaborated with Dr. Scot McNary in conducting a research study "School Library Instruction: Does Teaching Experience Matter?" (Robinson and McNary 2021).

We examined the relationship between years of classroom teaching experience and teaching in the school library.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Are experienced classroom teachers more effective in planning, implementing, and reflecting on school library media instruction than inexperienced or novice teachers?
2. How much teaching experience might make a difference; for example, are ten years of teaching experience better than two years or five years?

The study was conducted using fifteen years of archived lesson-observation data from 196 school library candidates' practicum experiences in public school settings. The candidates were grouped into four categories of classroom teaching experience:

- No Experience (N=46): candidates with no teaching experience
- Novice (N=28): candidates with 1–3 years of teaching experience

- Experienced (N=98): candidates with 4–9 years of teaching experience
- Experienced Plus (N=26): candidates with 10 or more years of teaching experience

The research instrument was adapted from the assessment document used by university supervisors in observing practicum lessons. The instrument was aligned with the 2010 AASL Standards for the Initial Preparation of School Librarians, and consisted of the following twenty competencies:

- Planning competencies: resources, collaboration, goals/objectives/indicators, assessment plan, instructional procedures, and universal design for learning and differentiation
- Implementation competencies: objectives, use of preassessment data, motivation, introduction, modeling, guided and independent practice, critical thinking, universal design for learning, formative assessment, feedback, closure, and summative assessment
- Reflection competencies: analysis/instructional design making, and reflection and self-evaluation

An ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was conducted for each of the competencies to determine significant differences between the competency means in relation to the experience levels.

Findings

The results were nuanced and complex. For example, in comparing instructional competencies between Novice candidates (1–3 years classroom experience) and Experienced candidates (4–9 years of experience), Experienced candidates scored significantly higher in thirteen instructional and reflection

competencies. However, no significant differences were noted among the planning, instructional, and reflection competencies when comparing the No Experience and Novice candidates (1–3 years' experience). While the research study was initially focused on preparation and performance of school librarians in relation to teaching experience, the data analysis revealed themes relevant to all in-service librarians serving K–12 learners. The following section provides an overview of these emergent themes and their practical implications for school librarianship.

Themes, Questions, and Implications for Practice

The following practical themes/trend differences emerged from the data analysis:

- **Theme 1 (T1)** – Lesser-experienced candidates tended to do more formal planning of instruction in comparison to candidates with relatively more experience.
- **Theme 2 (T2)** – In terms of teaching in the school library, no significant differences were noted between those candidates with no teaching experience and Novice candidates (1–3 years of experience) across all competencies.
- **Theme 3 (T3)** – Novice candidates (1–3 years' experience) rated significantly less competent than Experienced candidates (4–9 years of experience) across thirteen competencies.
- **Theme 4 (T4)** – Something happens in years 4–9 in terms of a maturation of pedagogy; perhaps mastery of the teaching craft in the classroom transfers to school librarian pedagogy.

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Questions Raised

The data analysis raised the following questions having practical implications:

- **Question 1 (Q1)** – How might the research study data impact preferences for employing school librarians in relation to levels of teaching experience?
- **Question 2 (Q2)** – Why are there no differences in instructional implementation between candidates with no teaching experience and Novice candidates (1–3 years of experience)?
- **Question 3 (Q3)** – How can newly hired school librarians be supported in their role of teacher?
- **Question 4 (Q4)** – Should school librarians with fewer than four years of teaching experience be provided with more and/or different types of on-boarding and on-going support than more-experienced candidates?

- **Question 5 (Q5)** – What factors would account for differences between teaching in a classroom vs. a school library?
- **Question 6 (Q6)** – What happens to classroom teachers in years’ 4–9 to account for increased performance across most of the assessed competencies?

Practical Implications

Hiring

One consideration for hiring school librarians is the finding that teaching experience doesn’t significantly translate into success as a teacher in school library settings until the fourth year of classroom teaching. In terms of the effectiveness of instruction and discounting the other school librarian roles, candidates with greater than four years of classroom teaching experience will, on average, be more effective school library instructors (T2–3, Q1). [Note: “T2–3” indicates alignment of this practical implication with themes 2 and 3, and question 1 from the sections above.]

Support

Varied mentoring and professional development can be provided for school librarians in relation to levels of their teaching experience. As school librarians accumulate

teaching experience, less-formal written planning documentation may be needed, as gains in experience facilitate school librarians’ ability to visualize or project planning phases. Lesser-experienced school librarians may need more support in the formal design and planning of instruction, and those with less than four years of teaching experience would benefit most from support in refining the implementation of school library instruction (T1, Q3–Q4).

School librarians with more than four years of classroom teaching experience have accumulated instructional proficiencies that could be applied to mentoring school librarian interns and school librarians with 0–3 years of teaching experience (T3–4, Q3–4).

Professional development and mentoring support may help new school librarians, including those with teaching experience, transition to the unique school library instructional setting, while also addressing the other four roles of school librarians: instructional partner, program administrator, leader, and information specialist (AASL 2018) (T1–4, Q5).

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be supported by providing professional development and guidance in the adapting to unique factors impacting school library instruction:

- Simultaneously teaching and managing students (and faculty) in multiple instructional environments within the school library (for example, some students receiving formal whole-class instruction, while other learners are working independently, in small groups, or in makerspace areas)
- Minimizing distractions while supporting large-class instruction, groups, and individual students working simultaneously
- Adapting to collaborative planning and instruction

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- Adapting to flexible scheduling where applicable
- Working with the entire school's student population, and teaching different students each day in multiple class sessions
- Having to constantly set expectations and routines with each new class arriving at the school library
- Dealing with other building responsibilities while teaching, such as being interrupted while teaching to address a technical issue somewhere else in the school
- Focusing on program administration and management of student learning behaviors in all areas of the library
- Adjusting from standardized and/or scripted curriculum in the classroom to having more freedom in planning and implementing information-literacy lessons to meet the unique needs of each class in the school library (T5, Q5).

Conclusion

Analysis of the research study data revealed differences among planning, implementing, and reflecting on instruction across degree candidates in the context of the pre-service school librarians' levels of prior classroom teaching experience. The research data does not support the assumption by those hiring new school librarians that applicants with more classroom teaching experience will always be more-effective teachers in the school library than will applicants with less classroom experience. The results of the research are more nuanced and affected by school librarians' multiple roles and responsibilities. School librarians with fewer than

four years of teaching experience may need more and specialized mentoring and professional development to advance their pedagogy in complex school library settings. As in many research studies, ours raised multiple questions to be explored for continued improvement of preparation and practice of school librarians.



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